

ST. MARY'S HERMITAGE PRESS



BY BROTHER CARLO CARRETTO
LITTLE BROTHERS OF THE GOSPEL

Letters from the Desert

TRANSLATED BY FR. UGO-MARIA ESB (CSR)
THE HERMITS OF SAINT BRUNO



WISDOM OF THE DESERT SERIES

Letters from the Desert



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Note to the reader:

For English biblical text correlation we used the New Revised Standard Version Catholic Edition ([NRSVCE](#)) and for the Latin Biblia Sacra Vulgata ([VULGATE](#)) at [BIBLE GATEWAY](#)

For the reader's benefit and where possible we have added links to books which have been mentioned and that are freely available online (predominantly from [INTERNET ARCHIVE](#)). We have also added direct links to the bible quotations mentioned, we do so hope that you will find these of use. If any of the links should fail please be so kind as to let us know by [Email](#).



TRANSLATORS APOLOGIA AND DEDICATION

Your Excellency, dear Bishops, brother priests, consecrated brothers and sisters and all the faithful; It is with gladness that I dedicate this translation to His Excellency Dom. Alistair Bate [O.S.B.A.](#), ([CSR](#)) M.A. Div., Bishop Primus [HCCI](#); for his continued pastoral care, support, friendship and love. And of course for introducing me to the writings of Bro. Carlo Carretto of whom I had been previously unaware. Thank you Your Grace.

A well-known Italian saying declares '*traduttore, traditore*', 'translator, traitor,' implying that the translator is inherently impotent to remaining steadfast to the original text. A good translation is one that looks nothing like a translation, the translator should be invisible, their work limited to conveying the original meaning in a fluent and natural style. This is however, not always achievable. Whilst trying to remain true-hearted to Brother Carretto's words they do not always translate well as on occasions he slips into his local Piemontese dialect. I apologise for any inaccuracies, my Italian being somewhat rusty, should you feel inclined to let me know of any errors or omissions I will happily consider alterations for the next edition.

May Mary Most Holy, Mother of the Church, who at the hour of the Cross patiently awaited the morning of the Resurrection in the

silence of hope, accompany you with maternal solicitude and intercede for all of you, together with Saint Joseph and the countless Holy Martyrs and St. Mary's Hermitage patron Saint Bruno.

I assure you of my constant prayers and, with affectionate remembrance of the poor, the homeless, the sick, the children and young people of your noble countries, I bless you from my heart.



Dom. Ugo-Maria Ginex [ESB](#) (csr)

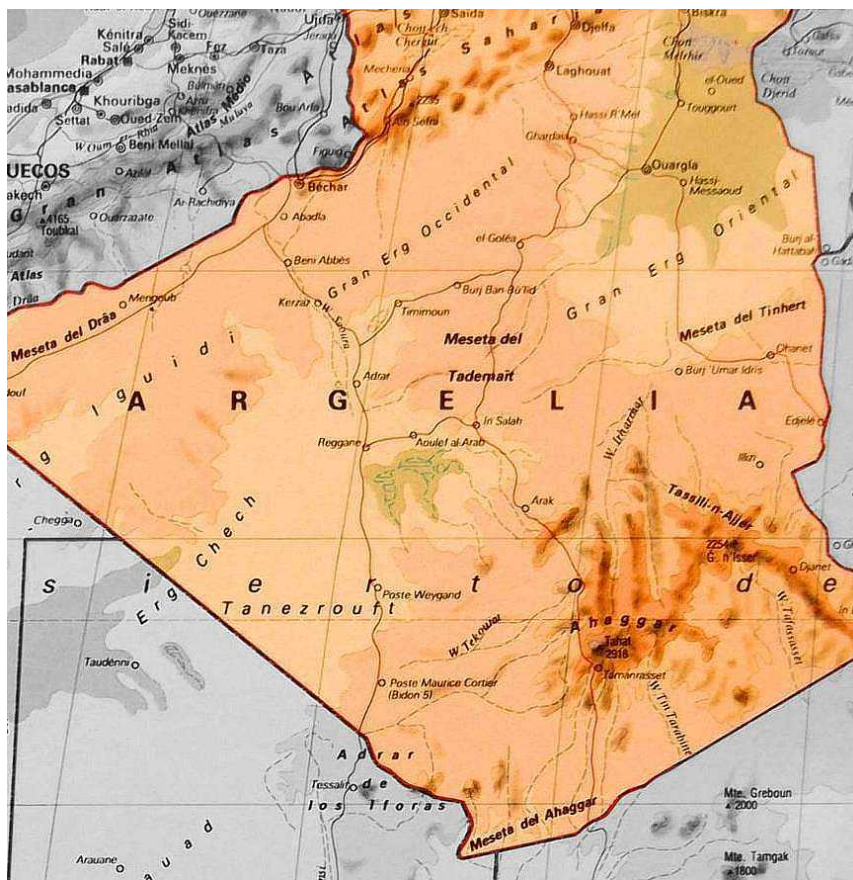
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On the Feast of St. Dominic

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Map of the Algerian Sahara



carlo carretto

Little Brother of the Gospel

Carlo Carretto (2 April 1910 - 4 October 1988) was an Italian religious author of the Catholic congregation of the Little Brothers of the Gospel.

Biography

Early life

Born to a peasant family from the Langhe, Caretto was the third of six children, four of whom became religious. Early in his life, the family moved to a suburban neighbourhood in Turin, where there was a Salesian oratory which would have much influence on the formation of the whole Carretto family. The Salesian spirit would also be felt in the professional life that Carretto began at the age of eighteen as an elementary teacher in Gattinara.

Social Activism

He entered the youth sector of Catholic Action in Turin at the age of twenty-three by the invitation of its then president Luigi Gedda. After completing his studies, he graduated in Philosophy from Turin. From 1936 to 1952, his

involvement in Catholic Action grew until he became its National Youth President. In 1940, after winning a competition, he was sent to be the Educational Director in Bono, Sardinia. But his involvement there was short due to conflicts with the Fascist regime and the influence his teachings exerted on young people beyond the bounds of the school. So he was sent to Isili and then back to Piedmont. There he was allowed to resume his work as a teaching director at Condove, in Susa Valley, about 30 kilometres from Turin. With the advent of the Italian Social Republic, he received from Rome the task of reorganising the structure of the Catholic Action of Northern Italy. From a business point of view, he was removed from the list of teaching directors and kept under surveillance for not having joined the regime.

At the end of the war in 1945, Caretto and Gedda jointly created the National Association of Catholic Masters in Rome. In 1946 he became the national president of the Italian Youth of Catholic Action (GIAC). In 1948, on the occasion of the 80th anniversary of the foundation of Catholic Action, he organised a large youth demonstration in Rome which became known as the famous gathering of the three hundred thousand “*baschi verdi*”.

Shortly thereafter he founded the International Office of Catholic Youth, of which he became the vice president. In 1949, with his friend Enrico Dossi, he created a new agency within the GIAC dedicated to young people's tourism. In time it would become the Youth Tourism Centre (CTG), of which he was the first national president.

In 1952 Carretto found himself in disagreement with an important part of the Catholic political world that desired an alliance with the political right. He had to resign from his position as president of GIAC. It was at this time that he decided to join the religious congregation of the Little Brothers of Jesus which had been founded by René Voillaume and inspired by Charles de Foucauld.

Religious Life

On December 8, 1954 he left for the novitiate of El Abiodh Sidi Cheikh District, near Oran, Algeria. For ten years he lived an eremitical life in the Sahara composed of prayer, silence and work, an experience he expressed in Letters from the Desert, as in all the books he would later write. The same experience fed his whole life and his subsequent action. There he rediscovered his old friend Arturo Paoli, who

also passed from the leadership of Catholic Action to religious life in the Sahara Desert.

He returned to Italy in 1965 and settled in Spello, Umbria, where Leonello Radi (a former president of GIAC) managed to have the fraternity of the Little Brothers of the Gospel entrust the former Franciscan convent of San Girolamo, near the cemetery. Brother Carlo was enthusiastic about the new arrangement. Leonello Radi said: “the main activity of Carlo Carretto was the eight hours of prayer a day, I carried it I do not know how many times with my red beetle, during the trip we talked and, above all, we prayed”. Soon the spirit of initiative of Carretto and the prestige it enjoys opened the community to the reception of those who, believers or not, wished to spend a period of reflection and search for faith lived in prayer, in manual work and in the exchange of experiences. At the convent where the Fraternity was, many country houses scattered on Mount Subasio were added, transformed into hermitages named after various holy figures. For over twenty years, Coretto was the animator of this centre flanked by its many collaborators, friends and benefactors, including the Roman engineer Renato Di Tillo who was very important for the activity of the

group and a fraternal friend also of Saint Teresa of Calcutta.

Later life

During these years he continued his activities as a writer. One notable book of that period was the *Small Family Church* which provoked controversy in the Catholic world over whether the ideas it expressed align with Christian morality. A man of the word and of the pen, he used these two means very effectively to communicate to others his "discoveries" and his experience of faith.

His books have been translated into many languages creating a group of readers in many countries around the world. Consequently, he was often invited to bring his word to conferences and spiritual meetings. His deep interiority did not isolate him from the world and from his problems but instead pushed him to take an interest in the spirits of "prophecy" (i.e. preaching) and service.

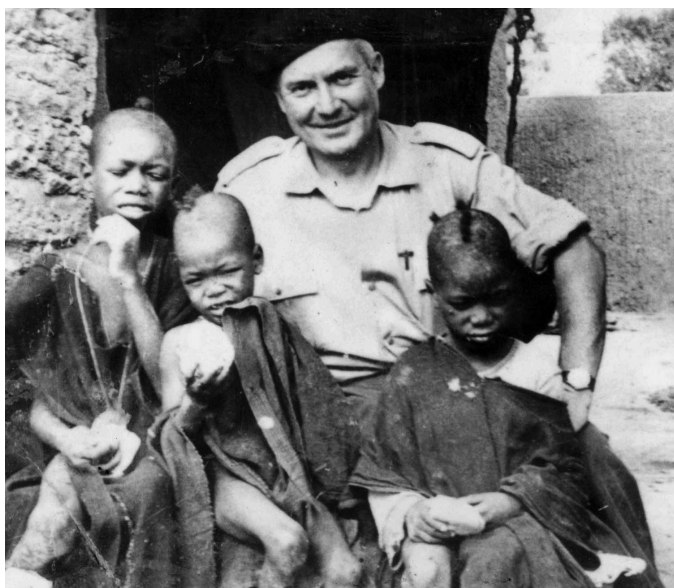
Despite his retirement, he has always participated in the events of Italian society. In 1974, during the debate around the referendum on divorce, he joined the group of "Catholics for the No", opposed to the repeal of the law on divorce already in force.

However, the Italian Catholic Action remained his first love, never forgotten. In 1986, when internal conflicts with the National Presidency of ACI pushed Pope John Paul II to recall the association to a more visible commitment in the world, Carretto wrote a Letter to Peter in which he passionately defends the “religious choice” pursued by the ACI of the new Statute and its President Alberto Monticone.

Carlo Carretto died in his hermitage of Saint Jerome in Spello on the night of Tuesday 4 October 1988, the feast of Saint Francis of Assisi, of whom he had been a biographer.

Prayer; Fraternal love; sharing the life of the poor.

Born in the vast Saharan desert, the brothers retain a sense of the value of living with a minimum of human supports in the simple presence of the living God. Their mission is to be “among people” (in the ‘heart of the masses’), but like Jesus they retire periodically to the ‘desert’, to be more free to seek God, and to learn dependence on God alone. The desert is a place where one is ‘stripped down’ to basic essentials, a key experience on the road to contemplation.
Desert essentials.



List of His Works Published in Italian

1. Letters from the desert. Brescia, La Scuola, 1967.
2. El-Abiodh - spiritual diary: 1954-1955. Assisi, Cittadella, 1990.
3. What matters is to love. Rome, Ave, 1995.
4. And God saw that it was good. Rome, Ave, 1995.
5. Small church family. Rome, Ave, 1996.
6. In love with God. Autobiography . Assisi, Cittadella, 1997.
7. Letters to Dolcidea: 1954-1983. Assisi, Cittadella, 1997.
8. The God who comes. Rome, Città Nuova, 1998.
9. Love blossoms in the desert. Cinisello Balsamo, San Paolo, 1998.
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15. An endless journey. Assisi, Cittadella, 2002.
16. Beyond things. Assisi, Cittadella, 2003.
17. I searched and found. My experience of God and of the Church. Assisi, Cittadella, 2003.
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19. The desert in the city. Cinisello Balsamo, San Paolo, 2003.
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LETTERS FROM THE DESERT

BY BROTHER CARLO CARRETTO

INTRODUCTION

The call of God is a mysterious thing because it happens in the darkness of faith. In addition it has a voice so tenuous and so discreet, which engages all the inner silence to be captured.

Yet nothing is so decisive and upsetting for a man on earth, nothing more secure and stronger.

This call is continuous: God always calls! But there are some characteristic moments of this divine appeal, moments that we mark in our notebook and which we never forget.

Three times in my life I heard this call. The first time determined my conversion at 18 years of age. I was in a country village, a primary school teacher.

A mission came to town on the occasion of Lent. I attended, and from it I have the remaining memory of antiquated and nauseous preaching. I can say that the words certainly did not shake my state of indifference and of sin. But when I knelt before an old missionary, whose clear and simple eyes I remember, to expose my confession, I felt the passage of God in the silence of the soul.

From that day on I felt a Christian and I noticed that my life had changed.

The second time was at 23 years of age. I was thinking of getting married; and I did not even know there could be an alternative for me.

I met a doctor who told me about the Church and the beauty of serving it with all our being, while remaining in the world. I'm not too sure what happened those days nor how it happened; the fact is that, praying in a deserted church where I had entered to vent the tumult of the thoughts that stirred my mind, I heard the

same voice that I had heard during my confession with the old missionary. "You will not marry, you will offer your life to me, I will be your love forever".

It was not difficult to renounce marriage and consecrate myself to God, because everything had changed in me; to me it would have seemed strange to fall in love with a girl, as God filled my life so much.

They were years full of work, of passions, of encounters with souls, of great dreams. The same mistakes - and they were many - were due to violence of what was burning inside me and it was not yet purified.

Many years had passed; and many times I found myself praying just to ask to hear the sound of that voice again which had been so important to me.

It was 44 years old when this occurred; and it was the most serious call of my life: the call to contemplative life. It was determined in the deepest of faith, where the darkness is absolute and human forces cannot help anymore.

This time I had to say yes without understanding anything: “Leave everything, and come with me into the desert, I no longer want your actions, I want your prayer, your love”.

Someone, seeing me depart for Africa, he thought I’d had a crisis of despair, of resignation. Nothing could have been further from the truth than that. I’m so optimistic by nature and full of hope, I do not know what despair is or how to give up during a struggle.

No; it had been the decisive call. And I never understood it more than on the evening at Vespers of San Carlo back in 1954, when I had said yes to the Voice. “Come with me into the desert”. There is something more efficacious than your actions: prayer; there is a force more effective than your words: love!

And I went into the desert.

Without having read the Constitutions of the Little Brothers of Jesus, I entered their

Congregation; without knowing Charles de Foucauld I started to follow him.

It was enough for me to have heard the voice say to me: "This is your road."

It was by walking with the Little Brothers on the desert tracks that I discovered the goodness of the way; it was by following Father de Foucauld that I became convinced that this was my way.

But God had already told me in faith!

But am I doing the right thing by writing of these things?

When I arrived in El Abiod Sidi Seik for the novitiate, my maestro told me with the perfect calm of a man who had lived in the desert for twenty years: "Il faut faire une coupure, Carlo."

I understood what he meant with those words and I decided to make the cut even though it would be painful.

I had been keeping a large notebook in my bag on which were noted the addresses of my old friends: there were thousands of them.

The Lord in his goodness had never let me miss out on the joys of friendship and had navigated the boat of my life on a real river of love.

If there was any remaining suffering hidden within me it was certainly that I could not - at the moment of my departure for Africa - speak to each of them, explain the reason for my abandonment, say that I was obeying a clear call from God and that, even if I'm on another trench, I would have continued to soldier on with them in the fields of the apostolate.

But it was necessary to make the famous "coupure" and I did it with courage and with great trust in God.

I took the address book , which for me was my last connection to the past and I went to burn it behind a dune during a retreat day.

I still see the blackened remains of the notebook transported away by the wind of the Sahara.

But burning an address book does not mean you have destroyed the friendship, nor was this required of me; rather ... I have never loved and prayed so much for my old friends as I have in the solitude of the desert. I recalled their faces again, I felt their problems, their pains exacerbated by the distance.

They had become for me like a flock that would belong to me forever and whom I had to conduct with me every day to the fountain of prayer.

Almost physically I felt them around me when I entered the Arab-style church in El Abiod, or later in the famous hermitages built by Father de Foucauld in Tamanrasset, at Assekrem.

Praying had become my greatest commitment, my hardest daily effort and I

had a vocation that meant I had to “bring others” into our prayer.

Well, after many years I can say that I have been faithful to my commitment, while the certainty has become increasingly clear that praying is not a waste of time and that there is no more suitable a form to help those whom we love.

There remains the problem of the address book that I no longer possessed, but it really doesn't matter because there are other means by which you can reach your friends.

Here, I would like to extend an invitation to them to one of the many wonderful corners of the Sahara towards the evening as the sun sets, and all find ourselves as we were then on that famous evening of September in 1948 at St. Peter's square. Remember?

Here there would be no need of torches, because the sky is so clear with stars. We would sit on the sand and spend the night

recounting about our lives these years passed, the steps taken, the tests endured.

I would think that the morning star would still see us conversing. For my part, I wanted to annotate in these “Letters from the Desert” the things that I would say, had I been given a similar opportunity, and which certainly represent a part of me.

Your Little Brother
Carlo Carretto



under the great rock

The track, white sun, wound before me with an uncertain course. The furrows in the sand, made by the wheels of large “petroleum” tankers, obligated me toward continuous efforts to maintain a true course of direction of the jeep.

The sun was high and I felt tired. Only the wind that blew on the front of the vehicle allowed the jeep to proceed, although the temperature was infernal and the water boiled in the radiator. From time to time my eyes rested upon the horizon. I knew that in the area there were large blocks of granite emerging from the sand: sought after places of shade in which to set up camp and wait for evening so as to continue the journey.

In fact, around noon, I found what I was looking for. Large rocks appeared on the left of the track; and I went over, sure that I would find a little shade.

I was not disappointed. On the north wall of a large boulder about ten meters high a blade of a shadow was projected onto the red sand. I put the jeep against the wind to cool the engine and unloaded the “ghess”, which is indispensable for setting up camp: a mat, the sack of food, two blankets and the tripod for the fire.

But, approaching the rock in the shade, I saw that there were already some guests: two vipers curled up in the warm sand who watched me without moving. I stepped back, approaching the jeep without losing sight of the two serpents; and I took the rifle, an old contraption that a native had lent to help dispatch the jackals that kept attacking his flocks, driven by hunger and drought.

I placed a medium lead cartridge into the chamber; and I withdrew a little, aiming to hit the two vipers at the same time to avoid wasting another shot. I fired and saw the two beasts jump into the air in a cloud of sand. Cleaning up the blood and their remains from the area, I noticed that the belly of one had ripped open from one

of them and a half digested bird was protruding from it.

I spread out the mat, which in the desert is everything: chapel, dining room, bedroom, reception room; and I sat down.

It was the hour of Sext, and took out my breviary.

I recited a few psalms, but with some effort, given my fatigue and the affair with the two vipers whose remains every so often the breeze blew onto sections of the verses. A hot breeze came from the south and my head ached. I got up; I calculated the amount of water that remained before I would reach the well at Tit, and I decided to sacrifice a little. I scooped out a bowl with a litre from the goat-skin "gherba" and poured it over my head. The water soaked into my turban, it went down my neck and soaked into my clothes; the wind did the rest; the temperature had dropped, from 45° C., within a few minutes to 27° C. Feeling a sense of refreshment I lay down on the sand to sleep, because in the desert one always takes a siesta before

eating. To be more comfortable, I looked for a blanket to put it under my head. I knew quite well that I had two. A blanket was next to me, unused and, looking at it, I did not feel at all comfortable.

But if you want to understand, you have to listen to the story. The night before I had passed in Irafok, a small village of Negroes, former slaves of the Tuaregs. As usual, when you arrive in a village, the people run around the jeep, both out of curiosity, and for those small services that are made by those who wander the desert road: bring a little bit of tea, distribute medicines, deliver some letters.

That evening I noticed old Kadà trembling from the cold. It seems strange to talk about cold in the desert, and yet it is so; so much so that the definition of the Sahara is as follows: "cold country where it is very hot when it is sunny". But the sun had set; and Kadà trembled.

I had the impulse to give him one of the two blankets I had with me and which formed part of my "ghess"; but I gladly

distracted myself from that thought. I thought of the night, and I knew I would tremble as well.

The bit of charity that was within me returned to the assault, making me see that my skin was not worth more than his and that I would do well to give him one of the blankets; and that, even if I trembled a little, it was the proper thing to do for a Little Brother.

When I left, the two blankets were still on the jeep; and now they were there before me and they were bothering me.

I tried to fall asleep with my feet resting on a big rock, but I could not. It had occurred to me that a Tuareg only a month ago had been crushed by a boulder just as he was taking his siesta. I got up to ensure myself of the stability of the boulder: I saw that it was kind of balanced, but not really dangerous.

I laid back down on the sand. If I told you that I dreamed, it would seem strange to you. But the strangest thing is that I

dreamed I was sleeping under the great boulder and that at some point ... It no longer seemed like a dream at all: I saw the boulder moving; and I felt the boulder fall on me. What a horrifying moment!

I had been macerated. I felt the bones crush and I was dead. I was amazed that none of my bones hurt: I was only immobilised. I opened my eyes and saw Kadà trembling in front of me at Irafok. This time I did not hesitate to give him the blanket, especially as it was laying next to me unused, only a meter away. I tried to reach out to offer it to him; but the boulder that had immobilised me prevented even the slightest movement.

I understood that this was purgatory and that the suffering of the soul was “that we could no longer do what we previously could and should have done!” Who knows how many years I would have seen that blanket laying next to me, in that uncomfortable position, to witness my egoism and therefore my immaturity to enter into the Kingdom of Love.

I tried to think how long I would have to stay under the boulder. The answer came to me in the Catechism: "Until you are capable of an act of love of perfect love." At that moment I did not feel capable.

The act of perfect love is the act of Jesus climbing Calvary to die for all of us. To me, as a member of his mystical body, I wondered if I had reached the maturity to love so much as to want to follow my Master on Calvary for the salvation of my brothers. The presence of the blanket which I had denied Kadà the night before told me that I still had a long way to go! Able to see a brother trembling and passing by, how would I have been able to die for him in imitation of Jesus who died for all? I understood that I was lost here; and that, if someone had not intervened to help me, I would have spent ages and geological epochs without being able to move again.

I looked away and realised that all those big boulders in the desert were nothing but the tombs of other men. They, too, had been judged in love and found cold, they

were there to wait for him who one day
said, “I will raise you up on the last day.”



You will be judged on love

Even today I can not tell you if the episode of the great boulder was a dream or what kind of a dream.

It exercised such a strong influence on my thoughts, having completely changed the perspective on how things are perceived, and I have never been able to attribute what we commonly mean when, upon waking, we say: "I had a dream."

No, no: it was something more. For me, that stretch of desert between Tit and Silet remains the place of my purgatory, the environment where my soul is willingly gathered to meditate on the things of God and where ... I will probably ask to go, after death, to continue my atonement, if I have not been unable in life to perform a perfect act of love.

Here is the great boulder under the blinding sun of the Sahara, the blade of shadow on the warm sand, the expanse of the horizon of the Wadi, furrowed by the

tracks of the lorries and jeeps of oilmen and geologists.

“You will be judged on love” this place reminds me in my immobility; and my eyes burned by the sun look far into the cloudless sky.

I do not want to fool myself anymore; I can not fool myself anymore: the reality is that I was not able to give my blanket to Kadà because I feared the cold night; which means that I love my skin more than that of my brother, while God’s commandment tells me: “Love the lives of others like your own.” And this still belongs to the Old Testament, the first revelation of God to man:

“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might.” ([Deuteronomy 6:5](#)).

That if we come to the New Testament and the Revelation of Jesus, things begin to get somewhat complicated.

“... Love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another.” ([John 13:34](#)).

Like me! that is, not just the blanket but life itself. In reality, the perfect act of love consists in your willingness to do what Jesus did: that is, to die for Kadà, for me, for everyone. With this view in mind, Heaven is the place where each of those present must be so “mature to love”, to offer their life for everyone else. It is perfect love, universal, radical, without a shadow of adversity, of antipathy, of limitation, poured into it as if into a fire.

Who is ready for it, raise your hand!

Therefore, after the vision of the great boulder, I see my purgatory as being long, terribly long, perhaps as long as the geological epochs.

This sand that I touch with my hands, flowing through my fingers belongs to the “Primary”. Any geologist would tell me: it is 350 million years old.

Those great reptiles that populated these places and whose remains I have seen in their graves in the Sahara belong to the secondary: 130 million years. Those camels that carry salt from the Niger and pass me in their long and elegant caravans, number their progenitors in the distant tertiary era: 70 million years ago. And man, this man so large and yet at the same time so small, how slowly he marches upon the cemeteries of the animals that preceded him! are from the quaternary, from yesterday: 500,000 years ago.

God is in no hurry to get things done; time is his and not mine. And I, a little creature, man, I was called to be transformed in God by participation. What transforms me is love, which God has infused into my very being.

Love transforms me slowly in God.

And sin, is also right here: resisting this transformation, knowing how to and being able to say no to love.

To live in our own egoism means that we stop at the human state and it impedes us from transforming in divine charity. Until we are transformed “by participation” in God, through charity, I will be of “this earth” and not of “that heaven”.

Baptism raised me to the supernatural state; but this state must be matured, our life has been given to us specifically for this process of maturation; and it is charity, that is, the love of God, which transforms us. Having resisted love, not having been able to accept the solicitations of this love which was telling me: “Give the blanket to your brother,” is so grave, that it creates, between God and I, the doorway of my purgatory.

What is the point of saying the Divine Office, listening to the Holy Mass and then not accepting love? What is the point of having renounced everything, to have come here between the sand and the heat and then resisting love? What is the point of defending the truth, to fight for the dogmas with the theologians, being scandalised by those who do not have the

same faith and then remaining for geological epoch at the door of purgatory? “You will be judged on love”: that is what that corner of the desert between Tit and Silet screams at me. “You will be judged on love” the great boulder under which I will spend my purgatory tells me whilst I am waiting to mature in perfect charity, the charity that Jesus brought to earth and donated to me by the price of His Blood, following him with a great cry of the hope:

“I will raise them up on the last day” ([John 6:40](#)).

That day is not too far off!



You are nothing

The great wealth of a Saharan novitiate is without a doubt the solitude and the joy of solitude, silence. A silence, that is true, which penetrates everywhere, that invades all of your being, which speaks to the soul with a marvellous new force, which is certainly unknown to a distracted man.

Down here you always live in silence and you will learn to distinguish the nuances: the silence of the church, the silence of the cell, the silence of work, interior silence, the silence of the soul, God's silence.

Learning to live these silences, the novice master gives us leave within the "desert" for a few days. A bag of bread, some dates, some water, the Bible. A day of hiking: a cave. A priest celebrates the Holy Mass; and then leaves the Eucharist in the cave, on an altar made of stones. So for a week, one will remain alone with the Eucharist on display day and night. Silence in the desert, silence in the cave, silence in the Eucharist. No prayer is as

difficult as that of the adoration of the Eucharist. Nature will rebel against it with all its strength. It would be preferable to transport boulders under the glaring sun. Sensibility, memories, fantasy, everything is mortified. Only faith triumphs; and faith is tough, it is dark, it is naked.

To place yourself before something that has the appearance of bread and say: "There is Christ alive and true", that is pure faith. But nothing nourishes more than pure faith; and prayer in faith is true prayer.

"There is no savour in adoring the Eucharist", a novice told me. But it is precisely this mortification of savouring that makes prayer solid and true. It is the encounter with God beyond the senses, beyond fantasy, beyond nature.

Here is the first aspect of spoliation. As long as my prayer remains anchored to savouring, the highs and the lows will be easy; depressions will follow ephemeral enthusiasm. A toothache will suffice to

dissolve all your religious fervour due to a bit of aestheticism or a rising of sentiment.

“You need to strip your prayer,” the novice master tells me. “You need to simplify, be uninhibited, put yourself in front of Jesus as an inferior man: without ideas, but with living faith, remain motionless in an act of love before the Father. Do not try to reach God with intelligence: you will never succeed. Reach him in love: that is possible.

The battle is not an easy one; because nature wants its pound of flesh, it wants its ration of pleasure, and union with the crucified Jesus is a whole other matter.

After a few hours - or days - of these gymnastics, the body placates. Given that the will refuses him the pleasure of the senses, it no longer seeks it out; it becomes passive. The senses fall asleep. Eating little food, staying awake and praying with humble urgency make the dwelling place of the soul a silent, pacified dwelling. The senses sleep.

As St. John of the Cross has put it, it is the “night of the senses” that begins. Then prayer becomes a more serious thing, even if painful and arid. So serious that one cannot do without it. The soul enters into the redemptive work of Jesus.

Kneeling on the sand, in front of the rudimentary monstrosity that contained Jesus, I thought of the evils of the world: hatred, violence, turpitude, impurity, lies, selfishness, betrayal, idolatry, adultery.

The cave around me had become as vast as the world; and my inner eye contemplated Jesus oppressed under the weight of so much evil.

Is the Host not perhaps, in its very form, like flat, crushed, crumbled bread? Did it not perhaps contain the Man of sorrows, Christ the victim, the Lamb slaughtered for our sins? And what was my place near Him?

For many years I thought I was “someone” in the Church. I had even imagined this sacred living edifice as a temple supported

by many small and large columns and under each column the shoulder of a Christian. I even imagined that one such small column was a burden upon my own shoulders. By force of habit by repeating that God needed men and that the Church needed militants, we actually began to believe this. The structure weighed upon our shoulders.

God, after having created the world, put himself at rest; the Christ, having founded the Church, retreated into Heaven. All the labours were left to us, the Church. Primarily to us Azione Cattolica, we were the porters who supported the weight of the day.

With this kind of mindset I had not been able to go on vacation; even at night I felt militant. And there was so much work, that there was no longer sufficient time for carrying it out. We always proceeded from one engagement to another, from one meeting to another, from one city to another. Prayers were always rushed, the speeches inflamed, the heart overwrought. Since everything depended upon us and

everything was going so badly, there was good reason to be worried. But who had noticed this? The way of our actions seemed so righteous and so authentic!

From childhood we had begun with the passage: “First in all for the honour of Christ the King”; thereafter having become teenagers: “You are a guide”; reaching adulthood: “You are accountable, you are a leader, you are an apostle” ... As a result of always having to be “something”, the soul bends towards being taken; and the words of Jesus: “You are worthless servants”, “Without me you can do nothing”, “Whoever wants to be the first will be the last” seemed to have been said at other people, for other times; and they flowed over the hardened soul without affecting it, suffusing it, softening it.

Its characteristic of the parable of my life. My first teacher told me: “First in all for the honour of Christ the King”; and the last, Charles de Foucauld, had suggested: “Last of all for the love of Jesus Crucified.”

Yet it may be that both of them were right, and that the culprit was me for not understanding the lesson. Anyway now I was there, kneeling on the sand in the cave which had taken on the dimensions of the Church itself; and I felt the famous militant's column on my shoulders.

Perhaps this was the moment for me to see things more clearly. I turned back suddenly, as if to rid myself of that weight. What had happened? Everything had remained in place, motionless. Not a scratch wound in the vault, not a graze.

After twenty-five years I began to realise that nothing had weighed on my shoulders at all and that the column was false, artificial, unreal, created by my own imagination, by my own vanity. I had walked, run, cycled, organised, worked, believing I was supporting something; and in truth I had supported nothing at all. The weight of the world was all on Christ Crucified. I was nothing, absolutely nothing. So you also, when you have done all that you were ordered to do, say:

“We are worthless slaves; we have done only what we ought to have done!” ([Luke 17:10](#)).

Worthless servants!



Who guides the things of the world?

The first impression that this adventure gave me was one of freedom. A new freedom, abundant, authentic, joyful. Having discovered that I was nothing, that I was not responsible for anyone, that I was not an important man, gave me the joy of a youngster on vacation.

Night came and I did not sleep. I walked away from the cave and walked under the stars in the middle of the desert. “My God, I love you, my God, I love you”, I shouted toward heaven in the phenomenal silence.

Tired of walking, I lay down on a sand dune and looked into the starry heavens. How dear those stars were to me; it was as if the desert had brought them closer for me! Being forced to spend the nights in the open, I had been impelled to find out their names, then to study them, to get to know them one by one. Now I could distinguish their colour, their size, their position, their beauty. I knew how to orient myself by them at a glance; and from their position I

deduced the hour without the need for a watch.

There is the constellation of Cygnus, which seems to be in conversation with Altair, brilliant as a diamond. Sagitta and Delphinus seem to listen, close in their humble smallness. Pegasus is rising to the east with its entourage of stars, while the Perl disappears into the west. Soon the red Angol will lead me to the elegance of Perseus.

I return my gaze on Andromeda. And the night is so clear, that I begin to make out the nebula that bears the name of the constellation.

It is the celestial body farthest from the earth, visible to the naked eye: 800 thousand light years away. Between that enormous distance and the smallest - four light years of Proxima, which will appear to me in two years in the constellation Centaurus - such is the space occupied by this mass of 40 billion stars which amounts to the galaxy to which we - a small grain of sand called Earth - belong to.

And beyond the nebula of Andromeda, millions more nebulae and billions of stars that my eyes cannot see but which God has created.

Why has it never occurred to me that even a small column that supports the cosmos is seriously not on my shoulders? And is the cosmos perhaps different from men? Why had it never occurred to me that even a small column which holds the cosmos does not weigh upon my shoulders? And is the cosmos perhaps different from men? I had thought about it.

It is true that Jesus had said:

“Go therefore and make disciples of all nations” ([Matthew 28:19](#)),

but he added:

“... apart from me you can do nothing” ([John 15:5](#)).

It is true that St. Ignatius had said: *“Act as if everything depends on you.”*; but he

added: *“wait as if everything depends on God”*. (Reflections of St. Ignatius Loyola).

God is the creator of the physical universe, as the creator of the human cosmos. God is the ruler of the stars as he is the ruler of the Church. And if he had wanted, out of love, to render men his collaborators in salvation, the limit of their power is very small and determined: it is the limit of a cable with respect to an electric current. We are the cable, God is the current. All of our power is in letting the current pass through. It is certain: that we have the power to interrupt it, as we have the power to say no; but nothing more.

Not the image, therefore, of a supporting column, but of a cable that transmits power.

But the cable is one thing, and the current is another; they are both quite different by nature; and the cable certainly has no reason to become proud, even if it is a cable that transmits a high voltage current.

To think that the things of the world, like those of the stars, are in God's hands and therefore in good hands, other than being the pure truth, is something that should give immense pleasure to those who hold to things going well. It should be a fountain of serene faith, of joyful hope and above all of profound peace. What should I fear, if everything is guided and supported by God? Why should I get so agitated, as if all these problems depended on me or my colleagues, men; don't search, instead, try to understand that there are other more interesting and more effective ways to overcome?

Yet is it really so hard to believe in God's radical actions in the affairs of the world! It is, I think, the most frequent and prolonged temptation to which we are subjected to on this poor world. The whole Bible is there to witness this drama; and, after all, the history of the chosen people is nothing other than the history of a handful of men to whom God continually and on every occasion asks: "Do you believe in me? I am the God of Abraham, of Isaac and of Jacob, I am the God who with a

strong hand brought you out of captivity from Egypt, I led you into an arid land, I fed you with manna from heaven and I gave you water to drink which sprung from the rock. For you I have stricken all the firstborn of Egypt, for you I have brought down mighty kings, and what have you done to make restitution to me for these wonders, for this continuous assistance? You have built wooden and silver idols and have abandoned me, your God”.

“Instead of worshiping the One who created you and saved you a thousand times from your enemies, on the prominent hills and in the sacred woods, you burned incense to foreign gods, who can do nothing, know nothing, They have mouths, but do not speak; eyes, but do not see. They have ears, but do not hear; noses, but do not smell. They have hands, but do not feel; feet, but do not walk; they make no sound in their throats..” (Psalm 115).

This is the story of all time, the history of Israel and our history. We too believe in

God; but then we trust men in power, we believe in their recommendations so we end up thinking that the things of this world are stable in their hands and that it is them that we must.

We too believe in God and pray to him; but then we convince ourselves that it is the great preachers who convert the souls; and we reduce our prayer for the expansion of the Kingdom into something futile, like a petition to an office from which we hope for almost nothing.

Thus, under a strange sky, in a shadow of faith and sentimentality, in an equidistance between God and the world, our poor religious life is mixed with prayers, contradictions and compromises.

God alone is, only God knows, only God can. This is the truth; and I discover this more profoundly from day to day through my faith.

God alone is ruler of the cosmos, only God knows when I die, God alone can convert China. Why assume a responsibility that

we do not have, why wonder if Islam has not yet discovered Christ and that Buddhism reigns without anxiety in a crisis of millions of brothers? The time will come; but this does not depend on me.

There is or is there not a physical feature of God, a sacred history for all peoples, a progression towards maturity?

Abraham did not know Christ, except in the hope of a promise; but by no means was he lost or forgotten by the Father. The time of the Incarnation had not yet arrived; when Jesus came, and not before, he would most certainly have followed the revelation of Eternal Wisdom. There are the plans of God, and these matter; there are human plans, and these do not matter, or at least they matter in relation to their synchronicity with the former.

But it is God who precedes, not man. Mary herself would have died in expectation without seeing Christ, if God had not decided that the hour of the Incarnation had arrived. The men of Galilee would have continued to fish in the lake and to

attend the synagogue at Capernaum, if He had not arrived and said, "Come."

So this is the truth we must learn through faith: to wait on God; This attitude of mind is not easy. This "waiting"; this "don't make any plans"; this "searching the heavens"; this "remaining silent" is the most important thing that we have to bring about.

Then comes a "time of the call"; the hour when you have to speak, when the hand becomes tired though baptising; the hour of harvesting, in short. But the blind, and we are the blind if at that time we think of ourselves as the performers of these wonders; the wonder, if anything, is that God uses us who are so miserable and so poor.

I had never wanted to reach this point, because I already felt the sadness of a question hanging in the air. The mere fact of wanting to ask a question is an error or a lack of faith. "To pray or to act? Stay or opt out? Going out to the world or seek refuge in the Church?"

We are at the beginning again; where man turns everything into a problem without ever being satisfied, the cravings of inquisitiveness overwhelm our willingness to carry out the word of God. However I'm not getting into polemics today; I no longer wish to discuss, I no longer believe in the power of convincing a man through the power of words. I keep silent under these stars in Africa and prefer to worship my God and Lord.

Notwithstanding, I have yielded at your insistence and of the the young people who have written to me even out here and there is only one word which I can say and which seems to be appropriate, moreover, suffering. Remember that in the whole world everything is a problem, minus one thing: charity, love. Love alone is not a problem for those who live it. I can only say, live love, search for mercy, let it take over, it will never fail to show you what you must do. Charity, which is God within us, will suggest the road we must take; it will tell you: "now kneel" or "leave now".

It is charity that gives value to things, which justifies “the futility of remaining on your knees for hours and hours in prayer whilst so many men are in need of my efforts, and that the futility of my poor efforts when considering that death will destroy all civilisation”. It is charity that hierarchises the intentions of mankind and which bring together that which is divided. Charity is a combination of contemplation and action, it is the suture point between heaven and earth, between man and God.

I reiterate, that after having known the most unbridled action and the joys of a contemplative life in the most glaring parts of the desert, the sermon of St. Augustine: “Love, and do what you will”. Don’t bother yourself, brother, on what you should do; bother yourself with loving. Don’t question Heaven repetitively and uselessly by asking: “What is my path?”; instead learn to love. Through loving, you will discover your path; through loving you will heed the Voice; through loving, you will discover peace. Love is a perfection of the law and the rule of all life, the solution to every problem, the stimuli of all holiness. “Love

and do what you will.” No; I can no longer do what I want when I love. When I love I do the will of the beloved. When I love, I am love’s prisoner; its demands are tremendous, especially when this love has God as its participant and a Crucified God. I can no longer do what I want; I have to do the will of Jesus, which is the will of the Father. Furthermore when I have learned to do his will, I will have fully realised my vocation upon earth and reached the most exalted perfection that a man can reach. The will of God: is what rules the world, which moves the stars, which converts nations, that which starts all life and which brings death. The will of God had aroused Abraham, father of the faith, it called Moses, inspired David, prepared Mary, sustained Joseph, made Christ incarnate and demanded His sacrifice, it was that which founded the Church. And it is still God’s resolve to perpetuate this redemptive work until the end of times. It calls the people into entering the visible body of the Church one by one at the right moment of their maturity after having belonged to His invisible soul through their right intentions and their “good” will.

Whether you are on your knees upon the sand atoning, at worship or if you are teaching at your desk in the classroom, what matters is that you do the will of God? Furthermore if the will of God entreats you to seek out the poor or to give away all of your belongings or to travel to distant lands, what else should there be? What if he should call you to start a family, or to go and work in an earthly city, why should you doubt? “In his will, our peace” says Dante Alighieri; and it is possibly the one expression that best summarises all of our dulcet reliance on God.



Purification of the heart.

That we are made to love is incontestable. But the difficulty is in determining what to love and how to love. I don't think it is wrong or contrary to our purpose "to love the creature". And it is definitely in accordance with our purpose "to love God". Therefore we must love the creature and we must love the Creator. But why in the Christian tradition do these two loves contradict each other, arousing hostility, almost as if loving one makes it impossible to love the other?

The cause lies within us, it must therefore be sought within us. It is our heart that is no longer capable of loving, It is like a deteriorated instrument which works poorly. The heart, this blessed heart, when it loves the creature, it easily loses its equilibrium. It launches itself upon the creature loved, wants to possess it, make it its own; it holds on to the creature with such passion, that it loses sight of the Almighty. In addition, it poisons the creature with unregulated relationships;

ruining it, making it a slave, or, better put, becomes a slave to it. Characteristic in this regard, because it is more violent, this love of sex for its own sake, with all the petty jealousies and selfishness and what they entail. Comparable is the so-called “special friendship”, in which the human heart attaches itself to the friend, losing peace, serenity, the balanced vision of things; in the worst case, its purity.

What then would we say about the love of money? Of slavery in which man holds the love of wealth? Even a love of work becomes dangerous, all the more so if it is cloaked in virtue! How many farmers are no longer able to rest on Sunday, the practice of passion, as the frenzy, drives them into the fields! And how many industrialists turn their lives into a living hell, swallowed up by the apparatus of responsibility. And the higher up you raise the worse it becomes. Even a love for study can create monsters of selfishness; the passion for research can make men mad and blind like termites in their dark subterranean burrows. In these situations it is quite evident that the love for the

creature is an impediment to the love of God. The love of God - is by its nature universal, chaste, balanced, holy.

Whoever is under His rule, lives in profound peace, has a hierarchical vision of things, knows what is freedom. Equally the love of God, passing into the heart of man, must be worked, cultivated, pruned, fertilised; of which God Himself is the skilled and uncompromising husbandman. Above all this love must be purified.

What does purifying love mean? It means to purify it from the shackles of the senses, from the pursuits of pleasure; in other words, it means allowing it to grow "gratuitously". Render love freely! What a difficult undertaking this is for creatures like us, trapped by our sins, most often hedged in by our own unconquerable self-interests! We frequently do not realise the depth of this evil, which is abysmal.

I speak not only of the selfishness of the rich who hoards riches for himself; of those who violently sacrifice everything for their own self-serving goals; of the dictator who

inhales the incense which is due only to God. I speak also of the selfishness of good people, of the pious souls, of those who have succeeded through spiritual exercises and self-sacrifice, who are able to say before the altar of the Almighty the notable profession:

“God, I thank you that I am not like other people” ([Luke 18:11](#)).

Yes, we may have had the courage from time to time in our lives - to believe that we are different from other men. And here lies the crux of the most radical self-deception, dictated by self-centredness: spiritual egotism. This is a cunning and babelic creation which utilises piety and prayer for self gain. I have no doubts when I say that a high percentage of desires that push the soul to seek God are polluted by selfishness. One can arrive at the point of consecrating oneself to God simply out of egoism, becoming a religious egoist, building hospitals out of egoism, or undergoing penance out of egoism. There really are no limits to these self-deceptions. And the road, once you have started, is so

slippery and dangerous, that God is then compelled, to save us, to treat us badly, I would say that He becomes cruel toward us. But there seems to be no other way to open up our eyes and bring us back to our senses.

It is a path of sorrow. At the soul that attacks Heaven through egoism, God will block their path with cold, with aridity, and with darkness. Consolation is transformed into bitterness, joys into unpleasantness, the thorns grow everywhere. The clouds seem to be there just to detain prayer. But often it is not enough.

Reversals, illnesses, disillusionment, old age come crashing in like robber birds on the poor husk of the person that had the courage to assert to oneself: "Lord, I am not like other men".

Very little remains to support the hypothesis that one is different from all the others, when one realises that one is shouting, or is crying, that one is afraid, or is weak, one is as vile just like other men.

Here is the voice of man in:

*O Lord, God of my salvation,
when, at night, I cry out in your
presence, let my prayer come
before you; incline your ear to my
cry. For my soul is full of troubles,
and my life draws near to Sheol. I
am counted among those who go
down to the Pit; I am like those
who have no help, like those
forsaken among the dead, like the
slain that lie in the grave, like
those whom you remember no
more, for they are cut off from
your hand. You have put me in
the depths of the Pit, in the
regions dark and deep. Your
wrath lies heavy upon me, and
you overwhelm me with all your
waves. ([Psalm 88](#))*

It is the purification of love, a refining fire
that burns us to waste and makes us bare.
God himself, who is Love, can do nothing.
Indeed, because He is Love it ties His
hands.

If the soul does not free itself through the agency of the cross, it cannot be liberated. It is a tremendous surgical operation which the Father himself performs on the flesh of His Son in order to save Him. And it is a tenet of faith that without the cross "*not fit remissio*". [*there is no forgiveness*] It is a mystery yet that is how it is. Pain purifies love; makes it true, authentic, pure; and, moreover, eliminates that which is not love. It detaches love from the taste which masks it; and renders it free.

When the deluge of pain is passed on to the soul, that which remains alive can be considered authentic. It is certain that not much is left. It is often reduced to a thin, slender shrub; upon it the dove of the spirit can rest to bring its gift; is reduced to a "yes" murmured through tears and anguish, but echoes the omnipotent "yes" of the agonising Jesus; is reduced as a child who has ceased to make polemics with God and with men, but in which he succours the embrace of the Father.

In this state, man is capable of a love which is given freely; on the contrary, he

can no longer bear any other kind of love: it feels nauseous when facing sentiment, is repulsed by calculated love. It finally enters into the logic of God, so often illogical to men of this earth.

Let us consider the logic of the most famous parable on the gratuitousness of true love. Let us hear it:

For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire labourers for his vineyard. After agreeing with the labourers for the usual daily wage, he sent them into his vineyard. When he went out about nine o'clock, he saw others standing idle in the marketplace; and he said to them, 'You also go into the vineyard, and I will pay you whatever is right.' So they went. When he went out again about noon and about three o'clock, he did the same. And about five o'clock he went out and found others standing around; and he said to them, 'Why are you standing here idle all day?' They

said to him, 'Because no one has hired us.' He said to them, 'You also go into the vineyard.' When evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his manager, 'Call the labourers and give them their pay, beginning with the last and then going to the first.' When those hired about five o'clock came, each of them received the usual daily wage. Now when the first came, they thought they would receive more; but each of them also received the usual daily wage. And when they received it, they grumbled against the landowner, saying, 'These last worked only one hour, and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the day and the scorching heat.' But he replied to one of them, 'Friend, I am doing you no wrong; did you not agree with me for the usual daily wage? Take what belongs to you and go; I choose to give to this last the same as I give to you. Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am

*generous?’ So the last will be first,
and the first will be
last.” ([Matthew 20:1-16](#))*

Understanding this parable, for us who have “the evil eye”, is not easy. The person who understands this parable even a little before they die are truly blessed. It means that his eye now sees properly and therefore can enter the Kingdom of reward, which is the Kingdom of real love.



walking toward the prayer

I came into the desert to pray, to learn to pray. It was the greatest gift that the Sahara gave me, a gift that I would like to convey to all those I love, an incommensurable gift, a gift that epitomises all the other gifts, the “*sine qua non*” of life, the treasure buried in the field, the precious pearl discovery at the market.

Prayer is the summary of our relationship with God. We could say that we are what we pray. The level of our faith is the level of our prayer; the strength of our hope is the strength of our prayer; the warmth of our charity is the warmth of our prayer. Neither more nor less. Our prayer had a beginning because we had a beginning; but it will have no end, and will accompany us into eternity, and it will be the breath of our ecstatic contemplation of God, and the song of our eternal happiness, when we will be “*satiated by the delights which spring from God’s torrent.*”

The story of our earthly-heavenly life will be the story of our prayer. It is, therefore, and above all a personal history.

As there is no flower equal to another flower, a star equal to another star, so there is no man equal to another man. And since prayer is the relationship of this man to God, the relationship is different for each man. Therefore there is no prayer equal to another prayer. It is the word that always varied, it was also infinitely repeated with the same syllables with the same tone of voice. What varies is the Spirit of the Lord which gives it life, which is never repeated and which is always new.

St. Bernadette Soubirous, who could not say anything except for the "*Ave Maria*"; or the mystic who could only repeat one monosyllable "*God*", are the most varied and personal prayers imaginable; because, under the veil of that one word, only the whole spirit of Jesus who is the spirit of the Father passes through. To understand prayer well, it is necessary to understand that you are talking with God.

There are therefore two poles: one small, weak, very weak: my soul; One immense and omnipotent: God! But here is the first greatness and the first surprise: that He, so great, wanted to talk to me, so small; He, Creator, with me the creature.

It was not me who wanted the prayer; it is He who had wanted it. It was not me who has looked for it; it was He who sought me first. It would have been my searching for Him if before all time it had not been Him who was searching for me. The hope on which my prayer is based lies in the fact that it is He who wants my prayer. And if I go to the meeting it is because He is already waiting for me.

If He had remained in His silence and isolation, I could not have broken mine.

No one has ever spent a long time talking to a wall, a tree, a star. If he had, he would soon have stopped, having not received a reply. With God, I have spoken all of my life; and I have only just started! There is another thing that must be said when speaking of prayer: it does not come from

the earth, but from Heaven. The cry that swells in my chest and which makes me exclaim: “*God, I love you*”; the effort that makes Faraggi, the blind Muslim repeat, when he walks on the path near me: “*How great God is!*”; the cry of David: “*Miserere*”; the exaltation of Mary: “*Magnificat*”; the tear rolling down the cheeks of those who confess: “*Jesus forgive me*”; the sudden ecstatic captivation of the scientist before the wonders of the universe, are works of the Holy Spirit.

It is the Spirit of the Lord who fills the world and makes us cry out: “*Father!*”; that inspires the current of prayer within us. It is our duty to lend our lips and to recognise the heart at the passage of the divine current; and to repeat over and over what the Spirit of Jesus has suggested to us and gives us strength to say.

It is certain that we can resist Him - as with love -; we can say no, we can dissipate the current that passes through the black pit of our soul, we can close our lips, we can keep silent. And that's what we do most of the time; because if we were solicited by

the call, we would be in constant prayer. To be precise, we must add that there is also a prayer we can call “ours”, born on earth, in the heart of man. But this prayer is not extraordinary: often it is a bit of spiritual triviality; asking for things that do not serve us or are not any good for us, those which would do us harm if they were granted to us; a filling the mouth with pious words for fear of loneliness or pain, of which Jesus had already warned us.

“When you are praying, do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do...” ([Matthew 6:7](#)).

If we want a paragon on the value of this prayer (we will say it is “not inspired”) with respect to the other, the true, that is dictated within us by the Spirit of the Lord, let's say that the difference between the two is like the difference between what the philosophers have said about God, and what the Bible and the Church have said about Him. The Philosophers, after endless lucubration and endless differences of opinion, were barely able to agree on the existence of God. The Church has a

personal, warm, living knowledge of God, even if it is dark and shrouded within the darkness of faith. In any case, we have no willing interest for this type of prayer: we know it well. How often have we found ourselves with a mouth full of it, yet far from the Spirit of God! How many times have we taken refuge in it just to escape the Spirit of God, His Will!

We went to choir to recite the breviary, while our duty was to go to the parlour to receive someone tedious and boring; we said the rosary while we went to an appointment which harms our soul; we lit a candle to ask for wealth; we bowed our heads in adoration while our hearts were full of impure love. This prayer does not come from Heaven but from the earth, and it will remain on earth, enriched solely by its futility and by its deceit. Of this the Prophet will say:

“you have wrapped yourself with a cloud so that no prayer can pass through” ([Lamentations 3:44](#)).

But I do not believe that there will even be any need for clouds, because it will not rise above one palm of our blind stubbornness. Yes, blind stubbornness that can last for years, decades; that creates in us a Pharisaical ambiguity, which sees us at the altar by day and with the lover at night, rich in money yet with a rosary in hand, turned over to our egoism and with the mind full of glamorous ideas for reforming the Church. There are not sufficient tears for us to cry for our misdeeds, this false testimony of ours to Jesus' Truth and Love, this veiling of the dazzling power of the Gospel under the smoky screen of a devout adherent who neither seeks nor accomplishes the will of God. Owing to the fact that: true prayer only begins when the will of God is sought. After all, things are simple, extremely simple: just listen to what Jesus taught us, simply take the Gospel and put into practice what He has told us. In short, its about the will and not words. Divine inspiration seeks goodwill within us. The spirit of Jesus is placed where the will wants it, because it is Love; and it takes two to make love. When I bow down to his love, he is not slow to

approach; indeed, he has already drawn closer, because he loves me more than I, poor creature, can ever love him. And love is shown by deeds, as with the prodigal son: getting up is a fact, abandoning pigs is a fact. There is a need for the soul to honestly say:

“I will get up and go to my father...” ([Luke 15:18](#)).



The times of prayer

Prayer is above all a word, a recitation, a song.

Incline your ear, O Lord, and answer me, for I am poor and needy. Preserve my life, for I am devoted to you; save your servant who trusts in you. You are my God; be gracious to me, O Lord, for to you do I cry all day long. Gladden the soul of your servant, for to you, O Lord, I lift up my soul. For you, O Lord, are good and forgiving, abounding in steadfast love to all who call on you. Give ear, O Lord, to my prayer; listen to my cry of supplication. In the day of my trouble I call on you, for you will answer me. There is none like you among the gods, O Lord, nor are there any works like yours. All the nations you have made shall come and bow down before you, O Lord, and shall glorify your name. For you are great and do wondrous things; you alone are God. Teach me your way, O Lord, that I may

walk in your truth; give me an undivided heart to revere your name.. ([Psalm 86: 1-11](#))

Often it contains a shout, a cry, a lament of anguish:

O Lord, God of my salvation, when, at night, I cry out in your presence, let my prayer come before you; incline your ear to my cry. For my soul is full of troubles, and my life draws near to Sheol. I am counted among those who go down to the Pit; I am like those who have no help, like those forsaken among the dead, like the slain that lie in the grave, like those whom you remember no more, for they are cut off from your hand. ([Psalm 88: 1-5](#))

Sometimes an explosion of happiness:

I love you, O Lord, my strength. The Lord is my rock, my fortress, and my deliverer.. ([Psalm 18:1-2](#))

Or an ecstatic admiration of his works:

The heavens are telling the glory of God; and the firmament[a] proclaims his handiwork.. ([Psalm 19:1](#))

Or an impassioned praise of His providence:

The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want. He makes me lie down in green pastures; he leads me beside still waters; he restores my soul. leads me in right paths for his name's sake. Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I fear no evil; for you are with me; your rod and your staff — they comfort me. ([Psalm 23: 1-4](#)).

This way of speaking with God is of all ages, and of all places. From the beginning of his spiritual life to the end, man will use these means - the words - to express his feelings to his Creator.

But even here as it is with love: the words are abundant at the beginning, then they become more rare and deeper, until they are reduced to some monosyllable which

contains everything. Normally a soul speaks a lot at the time of his conversion, during the period of his novitiate, in the first years of discovering God. It is the easiest period for the soul, also because everything takes part in covering prayer: novelty, sentiment, fantasy, art, passion. And God, in addition, puts in His share of consolation. And everything glides as in the early days of a happy marriage.

My heart is steadfast, O God, my heart is steadfast; I will sing and make melody. Awake, my soul! Awake, O harp and lyre! I will awake the dawn. I will give thanks to you, O Lord, among the peoples, and I will sing praises to you among the nations. For your steadfast love is higher than the heavens, and your faithfulness reaches to the clouds. ([Psalm 108:1-4](#)).

Another time of prayer is “meditation”. Sometimes it follows immediately after the word. Especially when the soul is mature, it interacts with it, merges with it. Sometimes it comes later, accompanied by

a series of truths and light. It is the time of the Book, the time when we search to understand that which others have said about God; it is a fervent time of reflection, of the theological study; a time of philosophical discussions, a time of the meeting of souls, beautiful times, very beautiful.

If the world knew of the joy that a Christian feels during this period, the peace that reigns in his heart and the equilibrium that dominates his faculties, they would be astonished, enchanted. I experience such a period as this; and I was lucky enough to live it with hundreds, with thousands of other young people. God, the Church, souls were our only passions. It seemed to us that at every dawn we had to forge a new world, we would launch ourselves against error like David against Goliath, there were numerous encounters to pray and talk of God. What importance were the sleepless nights, the long trips in the third class, the galloping bike rides in the countryside to fan the flames of the movement, the economic forfeit and the sacrificed holidays so that once a year you

could make the Spiritual Exercises? These remain among the dearest memories of my life, memories to which I return with joy and peaceful serenity. But let us return to meditation, there a thousands of ways in which to meditate, and it is better that each person finds which method works best for them. One will realise, making one's way, that which is best adapted for them. I would only like to share two things that I have learnt from my great master St. John of the Cross: first on the method of the meditation and the other, which book to choose.

On the method - St. John divided it into three sections - up to here nothing new.

- i. An imaginative description of the mystery upon which one wishes to meditate.
- ii. Intellectual consideration of the mysteries represented (nothing new here).
- iii. (and this is important) loving and attentive rest in God, to ensure we are ready to gather the fruits when the door of

intelligence opens up to divine enlightenment. This deeply human, loving, exercise must flow into serenity, into a loving rest before God. That is, it must be meditation that is clearly directed towards simplicity and inner silence.

On which book to choose - First, above all others choose the Bible. If you want to, read all the meditation books you want, but this is not essential; what is essential is reading and meditating upon Holy Scriptures. Enough of a Catholicism without a Bible! Enough of preaching without any substance, because it is not anchored to Scripture. Enough with religious formation that is not born of the Gospel. The Bible is the letter that God himself wrote to men during the millennia of their history. It is the sigh towards Christ (Old Testament) and the story of his coming among us (New Testament).

When the temple of Jerusalem burnt down, the Jews, who knew very well of all their treasures, abandoned everything to

the fire but saved the Bible. St. Paul knew the Bible by heart; and St. Augustine said: "Ignorance of Scripture is ignorance of Christ". The Verb made Word is the Bible, the Word made flesh is the Eucharist. I have no hesitancy in putting both on the altar and kneeling before them. There is a biblical reawakening, thank God; but we are still very far behind.

I said earlier that prayer is like love: words abound at the beginning, discussions are of an earlier time. Then there is silence and we mean monosyllabic. In difficulties it is sufficient for a gesture, a glance, a nothingness: it is enough to love each other. Then comes a time when words become pointless and meditation becomes burdensome, almost impossible. It is now time for the prayer of simplicity, a time in which the soul speaks with God with just a simple, loving look, even though it is often accompanied by aridity and suffering. In this period the so-called litanical prayer flourishes: that is, repetition of the selfsame expressions that are poor in words but very rich in content. Hail Mary ... Hail Mary ... Jesus I love you ... Lord

have mercy on me ... And it is strange how in this monotonous, simple litanical prayer, the soul is at ease, as if it were cradled in the arms of its God.

It is a time for the Rosary lived and loved as one of the highest and most inspired prayers. Often, in my life as a European, I have been able to attend or take part in animated discussions on the pros and cons of the Rosary. But, in the end, I was never really satisfied. I was not in a good position to deeply comprehend this method of praying. "It is a meditated prayer", someone said. Good! Then the young are quite correct to complain about the distractions given to the meditation of the mystery this useless repetition of ten Hail Marys. Announce the mystery and leave me to think. "No, it is a prayer of praise", others said; and we must think about what we say, word by word. But it is impossible! Who is able to say 50 Hail Mary's, whilst being distracted by the five representations of mysteries, without losing the thread? I must confess that in my life, even if I have to force myself sometimes, I have never yet managed to

say a single Rosary without being distracted. So?

And therefore it was in the desert that I understood those who discuss - as I have discussed in the same manner - on the Rosary, have not yet understood the soul of this prayer. The Rosary belongs to that kind of prayer that precedes or accompanies the contemplative prayer of the Spirit. Meditating or not meditating, distracted or not, if you love the Rosary profoundly, and you cannot spend a day without reciting it, it means that you are men of prayer.

The Rosary is like the echo of a wave that strikes the shore, the shore of God: "Hail Mary ... Hail Mary ... Hail Mary ...". It is like the hand of a Mother on the cradle of a child; it is like the sign of an abandonment of the difficult human reasoning in prayer for the definitive acceptance of our smallness and our poverty.

The Rosary is a point of arrival, not a point of departure. For Bernadette, the point of

arrival came very quickly, because she was predestined to see Our Lady on this earth; but it is normally a prayer of spiritual maturity. If a young person does not like to say the Rosary, if he says he is bored, do not insist. For him it is better to read a scriptural text or a more intellectual prayer. Yet if you meet a child in a deserted countryside, or a serene old man, or a simple woman who tells you to love the Rosary, without understanding why, delight and rejoice, because it is in those hearts that the Holy Spirit is praying. The Rosary is a bewildering prayer for the man of "common sense", as it is unfathomable to say "I love you" a thousand times a day to a God who is not seen; but for those who are pure of heart it is a comprehensible prayer, for those who are settled "in the Kingdom" and those that live the Beatitudes. Its a matter of repetition, slowly repeating the famous "Kirie eleison" whilst the heart is inclined toward peace.

*Lord, have mercy upon me;
I am a sinful man,
Christ, have mercy upon me;
I am a sinful man.*

And they come to this liturgical prayer of a spiritual exercise that appeals to their mentality, flowing into it with their breathing and with the beat of their heart. With regard to this, I was roused by a French book I read: [Le Pèlerin Russe](#), later accompanied by another book by an anonymous Orthodox monk from the Abbey of Chevetogne in Belgium: *La Preghiera di Gesù*. While prayer becomes scarce of words and rich in content, meditation becomes heavy and empty of taste. What was previously a cause for intellectual pleasure is now a cause of aridity and suffering. One has the impression that the inner life has been stopped; sometimes you think that instead of proceeding, you go back. The sky has lost its vivid colours, grey dominates the atmosphere of the soul. One begins to understand what it means to "go forward in the naked faith". Fortunate he who at this moment of his spiritual evolution has a good guide and more still has the humility to be led. It is not easy; because the presumption of knowing how to do it yourself is something very solid in our soul, and only the good and repeated

tumbles to affect the measurement. How does this aridity in meditating depend, this repulsion fixing our thoughts on spiritual things taken one after the other? Evidently it may depend on some of our guilt, it may depend on some disordered attack of our heart, on a lack of vigilance, on the thorns in which we have left good wheat to suffocate. The difficulty in meditating is not always a sign of the progression of a soul towards God, nor of a passage of a higher prayer. But it can - thank God - be the sign. How do we distinguish? The great St. John of the Cross tells us how. There are three signs that indicate the passage from discursive prayer to contemplative prayer.

1. The activity of the imagination is done without taste; indeed, it becomes impossible.
2. Imagination or senses no longer have any inclination for particular things. No consolation in created things, neither taste, nor savouring anything.
3. The soul takes pleasure in remaining alone with loving

attention to God, in inner
peace, quiet and rest, without
acts or exercises of the faculty.
Take note, this third condition is good. And
if it is in the soul, it justifies the other two.
If I have difficulty in meditating on the
things of God, if I can no longer fix myself
on this or that mystery of the life of Jesus,
on this or that truth, but ... I thirst to
remain alone and in silence at the feet of
God, motionless, without thought, but in
an act of love, means ... it means a great
thing; and I want to talk to you quietly
apart, because it is one of the most
beautiful secrets of spiritual life.



contemplative prayer

And here we are at the right point on prayer, on the most extraordinary revelation that we can imagine, at the deepest secret of the heart of God, on the true dimension of our “being Christians”.

Jesus, on the night he was betrayed, said:

“If you love me, you will keep my commandments. And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever. This is the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him, because he abides with you, and he will be in you” ([John 14:15-17](#)).

Then he added:

“They who have my commandments and keep them are those who love me; and those who love me will be loved by my

Father, and I will love them and reveal myself to them.” ([John 14:21](#)).

And to finish:

“Those who love me will keep my word, and my Father will love them, and we will come to them and make our home with them” ([John 14:23](#)).

There are three offerings from God to man: his Spirit, his Presence, his Manifestation. And, for these three offers, only one condition: “If one loves me”. The soul of man who accepts to love God becomes a “heaven on earth”, with the real presence of the Trinity in itself, with the dazzling activity of the Spirit and with God’s supreme will “to manifest itself, that is, of to be known to man”. These three realities, earned by the blood of Christ, and realised in us after Pentecost, invest our souls with such greatness, to overcome any possible human dream. Naturally, and in the first place, investing our prayers as the natural relationship between creature and Creator,

and gives it something infinite; yet better, something divine.

Let us first discuss this “presence”: *We will come to him and make our dwelling with him.* Why continue to seek God beyond the stars, when He is so close, as a matter of fact, He is within us? It is The Trinity that becomes a guest within our soul; it is the Earth that for us becomes Heaven. Heaven, this “concealed” place, is no longer an astronomical physical distance from Him, within the universe, but is a loving closeness, intimate and so close at hand, that any place becomes good to talk to Him, to be with Him, to worship Him. And the Holy Spirit in us? Here is the strong and meticulous architect of our union with God. It is He who encompasses us to Christ Jesus, He who teaches us what we must say to the Father, He who brings us a “new” Spirit, since our “old” one has shown himself to be incapable and iniquitous, He who with “unspeakable groans” prays to the Most High, and gives eternal value to our weak child like efforts to raise us up toward God.

What more can I say to myself: "Who will teach me to pray?", when I have a similar Master at the very centre of my being? Doubting the power of my prayer, when - although so poor and stammering - is sustained in its flight by the same Creator Spirit of the universe? No; I will no longer seek myself in prayer, I will not fall back upon my wretched self, since in my faith I have discovered that the Spirit of God has spread within my heart. But that is not sufficient. The promise of Jesus speaks of His presence, of an activity of His Spirit, and still speaks of a "revelation".

"I will reveal myself to you".

Revealing oneself to one another is a task of love, which must never end, not even in human love, because it must always remain something that is still "mysterious" to be discovered and known in the person that is loved. Imagine with God where "everything" is yet to be discovered! But here, speaking of God, something very specific must be said. God is unfathomable to man. All that we know of Him is not Him: it is an image, a symbol, a recall; but

it is not God. Only God knows Himself; and His knowledge remains to us a “mystery”.

But God has decided in His love to make Himself known to man, to reveal Himself to him; and this happens in a supernatural way, with an untranslatable language on earth. He who is under the action of this “revelation” can not say anything: living there experimentally, which he can not repeat. This is crucial knowledge for those who want to learn to pray. I lost too much time, because I learnt this truth too late. Yet it was clearly evident in the Gospel. I thought that in praying everything depended on me, on my effort, by the quality of the books I had in my hands, by the beauty of the words that I could bring into my conversation with God. More serious: I thought that the knowledge of God that I was learning through my studies and my reasoning were the true and the only ones and I had not yet noticed that it was just an image, a wrapping, a start of the true, authentic, supernatural, sustained, eternal revelation of God.

God is the Unknowable, and only He can reveal Himself to me through His own ways, words never repeated, concepts beyond any concept. In true prayer, then, more passivity than activity is required of me; more silence than words, more adoration than study, more availability than movement, more faith than reason. I have to understand “in depth” that authentic prayer is the fruit of a gift from Heaven to the Earth, from the Father to his Son, from the Bridegroom to the Bride, from the One who has to those who have not, from the whole to nothing. And the more this everything draws closer to nothing, the more ignorance comes to be without restraints. The discourse that you can make with the man who descends from the mountain after speaking with God for a long time is classic.

“Tell us about Him!”

And he will repeat with Angela da Foligno, one of the great Italian mystics:

*“Before God the soul is shrouded
in its shadows and in them*

becomes acquainted with Him more than I could ever have imagined being able to; and with such splendour, such certainty and with such depth that there is no heart that can in any way understand or conceive such a thing.

“The soul can say absolutely nothing at all, because there are no words that can express it, indeed, there is no thought or intelligence that could extend so far, so profoundly does it transcend everything, the nature of God cannot be explained. “When I returned to myself, I knew very well that those who feel God most profoundly can speak the least about Him, Precisely because they feel some of that infinite and unspeakable good, they can not speak about it.

“It pleases Heaven, that when you go to preach, that you understand, because if you did not, you would not be able to preach anything at all about God.

And therefore any man would have to remain silent. And then I would come close to you to you say: "Brother, talk to me a bit about God," and you would not be able to say anything, nor think of anything about God. So much would His infinite goodness overwhelm you.

"And yet the soul does not lose awareness, nor does the body lose any of its senses, indeed, we are totally aware.

"But you would say to the people forcibly: 'Go with God's blessing, because I can not say anything!'

"And I understand that all the things that are said in the Scriptures and by all the men from the beginning of the world up to today, seem to me almost futile in expressing the essence of the love of God; their words would be like a speck of dust compared to the universe" ([The book of divine consolation of the Blessed Angela of Foligno](#)).

So it was for Angela of Foligno; so it is for everyone. If we feel the knowledge of God increasing within us, our love will gradually increase for Him; yet about this knowledge we can say nothing. We know that this knowledge of Him is sapid, mysterious, personal, obscure; but we could not add a single syllable when attempting to describe it.

“I will reveal myself to you.”

This “revelation” that God makes of Himself to mankind is the soul, the fruit, the breath of so-called “contemplative” prayer; and it is an authentic anticipation of eternal life. Jesus gave us this definition:

“And this is eternal life, that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent.” ([John 17:3](#)).

*O Lord, my heart is not lifted up,
my eyes are not raised too high; I
do not occupy myself with things
too great and too marvellous for
me.*

*But I have calmed and quieted my
soul, like a weaned child with its
mother; my soul is like the
weaned child that is with me.
([Psalm 131](#))*

This is the psalm of contemplative prayer. Man walking on the path towards the roots of his being, towards his goal, towards his Creator, after having surpassed the first steps of prayer, after having purified it in suffering and in the aridity from human pleasures and self-centredness, is found on the threshold of eternity; there, where his strength can do nothing, where meditation itself becomes impossible and words, once so fluid, does not know whether to repeat a monosyllable of love or of lamentation.

No image can summarise of all of this better than the image of an infant that has been weaned in its mother's arms. And it is Jesus who again tells us: "Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven" (Matthew 18:3). But the soul has now become small and has understood

that it must receive everything and that its only power is to love. No; there is also another power: that of knowing. But ... what use is it at such moments? The anonymous author of the book on prayer states:

“But yet all reasonable creatures, angel and man, have in them each one by himself, one principal working power, the which is called a knowledgeable power, and another principal working power, the which is called a loving power. Of the which two powers, to the first, the which is knowledgeable power, God that is the maker of them is ever more incomprehensible; and to the second, the which is the loving power, in each one diversely He is all comprehensible to the full. Insomuch that a loving soul alone in itself, by virtue of love should comprehend in itself Him that is sufficient to the full — and much more, without comparison — to fill all the souls and angels that ever may be. And this is the endless marvellous miracle of love; the working of which shall never

*take end, , for ever shall He do it,
and never shall He cease for to do
it. ([Cloud of Unknowing](#), pp.
76-77)*

And why? Because He can be loved, but He can not be considered: love can grasp Him and keep Him; to consider no ..., never! It would indeed seem strange, at first sight; but nothing gives a sense of the universality of God, of the justice of God, more than this truth. If God could be reached with intelligence, how unjust it would be!

He would have facilitated the task to the sages, to the great men of this world; and it would have become incomprehensible to the little ones, the poor, the ignorant. Instead, no: He found the same rule so as to be the same for everyone: His revelation occurs in love, precisely in the faculty in which we are all equal. He loves the queen as he loves the peasant, he loves the wise man as he loves the ignorant.

*"I thank you, Father, Lord of
heaven and earth, because you*

*have hidden these things from the
wise and the intelligent and have
revealed them to
infants” ([Matthew 11:25](#)).*

“Remain in my love”.

But what becomes of the concepts? They are not suppressed; this would be contrary to the very nature of our intelligence. Therefore, they always subsist. But all the distinct concepts pass by in silence, they sleep like the apostles on the Mount. That's what you call infused contemplation or mystical knowledge.

It feeds on silence.

It does not resort to the use of existing concepts as a means for their knowledge. It becomes negative in a new and absolute sense. Hadewijk the Beguine says:

*“The single and naked truth
abolishes every kind of reasoning.
It holds me in this emptiness, and
fits me for the simple life of
eternity. All speech finishes here.
He who has never understood the*

*Word of God would vainly explain
that which I have found without
means, without a veil, above every
reasoning."*

If I desire something, I ignore it, because I am a prisoner of abysmal ignorance. Whoever believes in being able to say what is deep inside, betrays his inexperience. But God, which adventure is no longer intended, no longer seeing ... If we had "something else" at other times, love has now reduced us to nothing. (Poèmes spirituels, "Nova et Vetera" 1938, No. 4, pp. 362, 367). Yes; love has reduced us to nothingness. It has taken away all presumption of knowledge, of being; has reduced us to true spiritual infancy.

*I have held my soul
in peace and in silence
as a child
In its mother's arms.*

This is the highest state of prayer: to be children in the arms of God: silent, loving, rejoicing.

And if, for this blessed desire wanting to say something, to do something, you just need to open your mouth, then do so: choose a word, a small phrase that expresses well your love for Him; and then repeat it, repeat it with peace, without trying to formulate thoughts, without moving, reduced to a small point of love before God Love.

And, transforming this word or phrase into a steel dart, symbol of your love, beat, beat against God's thick cloud of unknowing.

Do not distract yourself, whatever happens. Good thoughts are also chased away; they serve no purpose.

The highest degree of contemplation, which can be achieved in this life, resides entirely in this darkness and cloud of unknowing, and with a upsurge of love and a blind gaze, they lead to the naked being of God, in Himself and of God alone.

A blind rush of love that leads to God, considered in Himself, and which secretly presses on the cloud of unknowing is more

profitable to your soul, more noble than any other exercise.

This is the work of the soul that most [*pleases*] God. All saints and the angels have joy of this work, and hasten them to help it in all their might; All fiends be furious when thou thus dost, and try for to defeat it in all they can. All men living in earth be wonderfully [*helped*] of this work, thou [*knowest*] not how ([The Cloud of Unknowing](#), p.71 ss).

This, my brother, is my wish, a synthesis of all the gifts the desert has given me.





contemplation on the streets

At this point it seems to me to feel in you, my friend, a question, accompanied with a slightly saddened smile:

“And then: is it necessary for all to go into the desert? What value does this action have, the commitment between men, the immersing oneself like yeast in this earthly city? How is this possible? The desert is far away, I could never ...”

I knew you thought about it; and it is absolutely necessary to explain with all clarity; because it comes directly in between a scandal for your soul, of which I could involuntarily be the cause.

Charles de Foucauld once said: “If the contemplative life were only possible behind the walls of a convent or in the silence of the desert, we should, to be fair, give a small convent to every family mother and the luxury of a little of desert to a poor labourer who is obliged to live in

the noise of a city to earn hard bread.” It is not so?

It was the very vision of the reality in which part of poor humanity lives that determines in him the central crisis of his life, that crisis that was to take him so far from his first conception of religious life.

Charles de Foucauld, as you know, was a Trappist and had chosen the poorest Trappa that existed, that of Akbes in Syria.

One day his Superior sent him to a wake for a dead man near the convent. He was a Christian Arab who died in a poor house. When Brother Charles found himself in the slum of the deceased and witnessed the true poverty around the body comprised of hungry children and a defenceless widow, weak and without any assurance for a slice of bread for the next day, he entered into a spiritual crisis that would have made him leave the Trappa, looking for a framework of religious life so different from the first.

“We who have chosen the imitation of Jesus and of Jesus crucified, are far away

from the trials, the pains, the insecurities and the poverty to which these people are subjected.

“I no longer want a monastery that is too stable, I cry out for a convent as small as the house of a poor worker who is not sure if tomorrow he will find work and nourishment and who partakes with all of his being to the suffering of the world”.

“Oh, Jesus, a convent like your home in Nazareth to reduce me to nothing, to discover how You managed when You came among us” (Charles de Foucauld, *Écrits spirituels*).

And having left the Trapp, he will construct his first fraternity at Beni Abbes in the Sahara and then at Tamanrasset, where he will be slaughtered by the Tuaregs.

The “fraternity” should have resembled the house of Nazareth, then one of the many houses you encounter along the streets of the world.

But then he had given up on contemplation? had he weakened his ardent spirit of prayer? No; he had taken a step forward: he had accepted to live the contemplative life along the streets, in a framework of life that resembled that of all mankind.

This is far harder!

And God desires for humanity to take this step. This is why Charles de Foucauld is at the cusp of a new age, of an age in which many will endeavour to combine contemplation and action, putting into practice the Lord's first commandment with vital concreteness: "you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength; and you shall love your neighbour as yourself. There is no other commandment greater than these." 'Contemplation on the streets': this is tomorrow's commitment of the Little Brothers, to all of the poor.

And we begin to analyse this element "desert", which must be present, especially

today, with the implementation of such a demanding program. When we speak of the desert to the soul, we say that the desert must be present in your life, you should not only entertain the possibility of going to the Sahara or the desert of Judea, or the Upper Valley of the Nile.

It is certain that not everyone can procure this luxury nor practically implement this separation from the common life. The Lord led me into the true desert because of the hardness of my skin. For me, it was necessary; there was not enough sand for me to scrape the dirt off my soul, as happened in the allegory of Ezekiel's boiling pot. But the way is not the same for everyone. You must however "make a desert" in your life.

Doing a little bit of desert, leaving mankind from time to time, searching for solitude to remake in the silence and in prolonged prayer the fabric of your soul, this is essential, and this is the significance of the "desert" in your spiritual life.

One hour a day, one day a month, eight days a year, for a longer period, if necessary, you must abandon everything and everyone and withdraw only with God. If you do not seek this, if you do not love this, do not delude yourself; you will never arrive at contemplative prayer; because being guilty of not wanting to - whilst being able to - isolating to savour intimacy with God, is a sign which is missing the first element of that relationship with the Omnipotent: love. And without love there is no possibility of revelation.

But the desert is not a definitive place; it is a stage. Because, as I have told you, our vocation is contemplation on the streets. Along the way we have to go back after our sojourn in the desert.

To me, this, costs a lot. The desire to continue living here forever in the Sahara is so strong that in anticipation of an order that will inevitably arrive from my Superiors I suffer: "Brother Charles, leave for Marseilles, leave for Morocco, leave for the Venezuela, leave for Detroit ...".

You must return among mankind, you must mix with them, you must live your intimacy with God within the noise of their cities. It will be more difficult; but you have to do it. And for this you will not be lacking the Grace of God.

Every morning you will take the road, after Holy Mass and Meditation, and you go to work in a shop, in a building site; and when you return in the evening, tired, like all poor men forced to earn a living, you will enter the chapel of a fraternity and for a long time you will remain in adoration; bringing with you, to prayer, all the world of suffering, of darkness and often of sin in the midst of which you lived for those eight hours, paying your ration of pain and daily fatigue.

Contemplation on the streets: is a nice phrase, but it costs a lot. Of course, it would be easier and sweeter to stay here in the desert; but it seems that it is not what God wants.

The very voice of the Church is increasingly felt to indicate to the Christians the reality of the Mystical Body and the apostolate in it, to recall a life of charity, inviting everyone to action, which commences with contemplation, returning to it on the side of the witness and presence among men. The walls of the convents are becoming ever subtle and lower; those who live virginity in the world multiply; the laity themselves become aware of their mission and seek their spirituality.

It is indeed the dawn of a new world, where it would not seem to be rhetorical in delivering “contemplation on the streets” and examples with which to implement it.

But I would not like to close this letter without saying two words about another basic element for the contemplative life, especially if lived in the world: poverty! It is too important, especially today.

Poverty does not mean having or not having money, or having or not having lice. Poverty is not a material thing: it is a

beatitude: "Blessed are the poor in spirit". It is a way of existence, of thinking, of loving; it is a gift of the Spirit. Poverty is detachment, it is freedom, it is above all truth.

Entering middle class homes, even if they are Christian, and you will be persuaded of a lack of the beatitude of poverty. The furniture, the objects, the set is terrifyingly equal in every home; it is determined by fashion, by luxury; and not from the need for truth. There was an old, robust, comfortable table rich with memories. No; you have to put it in the cellar and unnecessarily replace it, with one that is only pretentious, which is meaningless, its only merit being that your friends will say: that "It is fashionable".

This lack of liberty, better yet, this slavery to fashion is one of the devils that solidly clings to a large number of Christians.

How much money is sacrificed at its altar! And without taking into account that you could do so much good. Being poor in

spirit means first of all being free from what is called fashion, it means liberty.

I do not buy a blanket because it is fashionable; I buy a blanket because I need it. Without a blanket, my child trembles in bed.

Bread, a blanket, a table, a fire are necessary things in themselves. The use of which is to realise God's plan. "Everything else comes from the evil one", we could say, paraphrasing an expression of Jesus concerning truth. And this "remnant" is fashion, demeanour, luxury, greed, wealth, slavery, the world.

Not what is truly being sought, but that which appeals to others. Is there a need for this mask: without which one is no longer able to live.

But things become grave when "styles" come into its midst and expenses become astronomical. "This is a Louis XIV ..., this is pure Baroque ..., this etc., etc.". They become more serious when "the styles" enter the homes of men of the Church who

are called to a vocation of evangelising the poor. Yes, there is a justification, and it is that in these last centuries, from the Renaissance to the Baroque, the of the Church's triumphalism and by the foolish crowd's need to worthily express their honour toward God and the things of God could only be expressed with a luxury and pomp that is really extraordinary. And the poor were not scandalised, in fact they liked all that glitter and that sumptuousness. I remember my mother, who was also poor, speaking with the pride of a Christian and with contentedness of the beauty of the Bishop's house and the length of the cars of the prelates who parked below the window. But things have changed and they are not as they were if he understood or rather felt the blasphemy that shone behind his elegant American car, that Monsignor, my old friend, would hasten to shorten it or combine it with a functional dirty-grey vehicle or, better still, he should be cycling.

There is talk of the "Church of the poor" and I do not think that this is a rhetorical phrase. But we have to understand the

meaning of words. When one speaks of the poverty of the Church, one must not identify it with the “beatitude of poverty”. This, the beatitude, is an interior virtue and I can not and should not be judgemental of my brother.

Even he who is rich with possessions, even the Pontiff covered with a golden cope can and must be in possession of the beatitude of poverty: in the heart, they can and must be “poor in spirit”. No one can judge them on that demarcation line, especially in the Church.

When we speak of poverty in the Church we mean a social poverty, the poor reflection of it, attention to the poor, help for the poor and the evangelisation of the poor. And yet things are quite different.

When we speak of poverty in the Church we mean the relationship with others and this is what scandalises the poor, as it scandalised St. Paul how the Christians conducted themselves at Corinth.

“When you come together, it is not really to eat the Lord’s supper. For when the time comes to eat, each of you goes ahead with your own supper, and one goes hungry and another becomes drunk. What! Do you not have homes to eat and drink in? Or do you show contempt for the church of God and humiliate those who have nothing?” ([1 Corinthians 11:20-22](#)).

And do we not perhaps make the poor blush when we pass by with our might and wealth while they do not have the money to pay the rent? How can we evangelise from the heights of our economic security whilst they do not know if tomorrow will bring them work and bread?

But poverty as a beatitude is not only truth, liberty and justice; it is and remains love, and its confines become infinite like the confines of divine perfections.

Poverty is love towards poor Jesus, that is, towards the voluntary acceptance of a limit. Jesus could be rich; he did not need a limit to his desires. No; he wanted to be poor to

participate in the universal limitations of the poor, to endure the lack of something, to suffer with His flesh the harsh reality that weighs on the man in his quest for bread, and in his spirit the perennial instability of those who are without. This authentic poverty, borne out of love, is the true beatitude of which the Gospel speaks.

It is far too easy to speak of spiritual poverty, filling one's mouth with pious words and not to want for anything and whilst having a secure home, with well-stocked storeroom and bank accounts. No; let us let us not have false illusions and let us not change the most valuable words which Jesus expressed. Poverty is poverty, and remains poverty; it is not sufficient to make the vow of poverty to be poor in spirit.

Today there is scandal in the souls of the poor; and to remove it it would be better to talk less on the subject of chastity and to put more emphasis on the beatitude that is truly threatened of being swept away by the so-called reality of "living as Christians".

If it is true, how true is, that the perfection of the law lies in charity, such perfection must invest in full all my belongings and riches;

otherwise I will never know this beatitude. If I love, if I really love, how could I tolerate that a third of humanity is threatened to die by starvation, whilst I keep all my security and my economic stability intact? In doing so, I will be a good Christian, but I will most certainly not be a saint; and today there is an inflation of good Christians, while the world is in need of saints.

Knowing how to accept instability, from time to time putting ourselves in a condition where we have to say “give us today our daily bread” with a little bit of anxiety, because the storeroom is empty; to have the courage, for the love of God and our neighbour, to give without measure, and above all, keeping the great window of living faith open on the poor ceiling of our soul in the Providence of an Almighty God: this is required.

I know that what I have said on the subject of poverty is weighty and I know that even in the world I have not been able to implement it.

The one who has changed an old table in his house for an insignificant one, is me; who has lived for years behind the mask of “pleasure toward others” is me; who has spent money which was not only his for things “not real” is

me. And yet, despite of this, I can not keep silent; to old friends I have to say: beware of the temptation of riches. It is far more serious than it appears today to the well thinking Christians which sows devastation in their souls, precisely because it underestimates the dangers or because "for the greater good" everything becomes acceptable.

Wealth is a slow poison, which strikes almost insensibly, paralysing the soul at the exact moment of its maturity. They are the thorns that grow with the grain and that suffocate it just when it begins to grow its wheat spike. How many, men or women, religious souls who have overcome the hard obstacle of impurity, allowing themselves to be ensnared in the maturity of life by this well dressed demon of bourgeois tastes.

Now that solitude and prayer have helped me to see more clearly, I understand why contemplation and poverty are inseparable. We can not reach intimacy with Jesus in Bethlehem, with Jesus exiled, with Jesus working in Nazareth, with Jesus the apostle who has nowhere to lay his head, with Jesus crucified, without our having worked on the detachment from things, so solemnly proclaimed and lived by Him.

We will not come to this sweet beatitude of poverty in one stroke. Life will not be enough for us to realise it in full; but it is necessary to think about it, reflect, pray. Jesus, the God of the impossible, will help us; if necessary, he will perform the miracle of making the camel of the parable pass through the narrow and rusty eye of our poor sick soul.



Purification of the spirit

There is a catchphrase that has been passed around the world which says: "Putting together the money spent on slimming aids or trying to heal the organs ruined by too much eating on the two richest continents of Europe and America, would provide the means to give bread to the poor and malnourished peoples of Africa and of Asia." Which means that gluttony is a very clear quality of man, including the spiritual man, cultured man, refined man and - too often - religious man. Jesus, in this regard, would tell us:

"Whoever is faithful in a very little is faithful also in much; and whoever is dishonest in a very little is dishonest also in much. If then you have not been faithful with the dishonest wealth, who will entrust to you the true riches?" ([Luke 16:10-11](#)).

If we replace such gluttony at the table of the body, let us imagine how we would have multiplied it a hundredfold at the

table of spiritual matters, if ... if there was a taste to make us feel enthralled! We would have made an assault on Heaven, just as did Satan. Repeating it would be useless: we are sick, unbalanced, sensual, bad. You understand: all of us. Jesus, giving judgment on us, summary, authentic, scholastic judgment, said:

“If you then, who are evil...” ([Matthew 7:11](#)).

And on the cross he completed the judgment:

“Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing.” ([Luke 23:34](#)).

Wicked and crazy! We are so in small matters as we are with the big. We are doing this when we have indigestion whilst leaving our neighbour starving we continue to be so in our prayer and spiritual matters. But to stop us, to block our assault on Heaven, to impede the indigestion and the forced fattening of the spirit, God had a radical idea: naked faith,

hope without memory, charity without over-sentimentality. The man who after his first steps in spiritual life launches himself into the battles of prayer and union with God, will be dumbfounded by the aridity of the path. The more it advances, the darker it becomes around him; the more he walks, all the more bitter or insipid it becomes. He even has to, just to get a little comfort, recall the ancient joys, those of his first steps, those that God gave him so as to draw him to Himself. At times he will even be tempted to shout: "But Lord, if You help us a little more, You would have followers searching for You". But God does not listen to such invocations; indeed, instead of relishing, it adds boredom; and instead of light adds darkness. And it is right there, halfway through our journey, that we do not know if we should go forward or backward; better ... we feel like going backwards. And only then does the real battle begin and that things become serious. Yes; they become serious, first of all because they become real. We begin by discovering what we are worth: nothing or little more. We believed, under the impulse of feelings, to be generous; instead we find

ourselves to be egocentric. We thought, under the false light of religious aesthetics, of knowing how to pray; and we realise that we no longer knew how to say "Father". We convinced ourselves that we were humble, helpful, obedient; and we see that pride has invaded our whole being, even to the deepest roots. Prayer, human relationships, activity, apostolate: everything is polluted. Now is time of reckoning; and these are very meagre.

Removing some privileged soul - who understood right from the beginning where the problem lies and, and not allowing himself to be deceived either by men or by Satan, has immediately placed himself on the harsh and true path of humility and spiritual infancy - most men are called to make a harsh and painful experience. Normally this occurs around one's fortieth year: a great liturgical period in one's life, a biblical period, a period of the meridian demon, the period of one's second youth, man's pivotal period:

"For forty years I loathed that generation and said, "They are a

*people whose hearts go astray,
and they do not regard my
ways.” ([Psalm 95:10](#))*

This is the period when God decided to put man's back to the wall who so far has escaped behind a smokescreen of the 'half yeses and half no's.' With reversals, boredom, darkness; and more often and deeper still, the vision or experience of sin. Man discovers what he is: a poor thing, a fragile being, weak, a mixture of hubris and pettiness, fickle, indolent, irrational. There are no limits to man's misery; and God allows him to swallow all of it including the dregs.

And even for those who in this situation do not sin because helped by grace, it tremendously opens before their eyes, the vision of true things: God, man, sin.

The soul aware of walking on a tightrope; and under the tightrope see's the deserved hell a hundred times and a hundred times closed through the mercy of God.

There is no sin that he has not committed or that he does not intimately feel capable of committing. But it is not enough.

In the depth lies the most decisive fault, more extensive if hidden, barely or perhaps never erupting into single concrete works, in which one pushes towards the surface of the world, but that from the depth, from the inner layers of our being - as Welte says - soaked with poisonous sap and very extensively harming the layers of our lives: a fault that consists more in general attitudes than in single actions, but that mostly determines the true qualities of the human heart, better than actions; guilt that is hidden, even camouflaged, because we barely and often only after a long time are we able to glimpse it with our eyes, nevertheless alive enough within our conscience enabling it to contaminate us and which weighs far more than all the things we usually confess.

I mean the attitudes that surround our entire life like an atmosphere, and that are, so to speak, in all of our actions and omissions; sins of which we can not rid ourselves, hidden and general things: idleness and cowardice, deceit and vanity, of which not even our prayers can be

entirely free of; that weights heavily on our whole existence and damages it.

The time for games, comedy, eloquence, "as if ..." are over. One has finally come to know his own ignorance at the brink of the abyss that separates the creature from the Creator. There, no one lives unless through almsgiving, by an unknown, ungraspable grace.

All the means have proven to be impotent, all the routes too short. The divine, impenetrable night envelops us; the frightful solitude, though necessary is inevitable, it accompanies us. Every word of consolation seems like a lie to us: we have the impression that God has abandoned us. In this truly painful state, prayer becomes true and strong, even if dry as the sand.

The soul speaks to his God with his poverty, with his pain; even more, with its impotence and vileness. Words become increasingly scarce, more naked. This leads to silence, which is a step toward prayer; because it is without limits, while every

word has a limit. And spiritual gluttony? Oh, it is always there! Smouldering under the ashes; but it is less violent, more prudent, more dominated.

God now intervenes again with consolations, since it would be impossible to live in that state of abandonment. It is He who returns to solicit the soul with the touch of his sweetness. And the soul accepts with gratitude; but at the same time is frightened by the blows it received, that he does not dare ask for anything else.

Basically, having understood that he must allow it to be done, that he must abandon himself to his Redeemer, who alone can not do anything, that God can do everything And if remaining still and immobile, as if wrapped up in God's faithfulness ... oh! he will soon realise that things have changed, and that the march, though still heavy, is in a good direction. It is the direction of love; and it will come as the light comes after the darkness, the noon after the dawn. What matters is to let God do it.



secterianism

Tonight it is also Abdaraman who accompanies me to the hermitage for adoration: two hundred meters that we walk together, holding hands and talking about this and that. But do you know who Abdaraman is? He is a Muslim boy of perhaps eight years of age. I say “perhaps”, because here there is no government Registry Office, and no one takes note of the birth of a child; so few know their age with any accuracy.

Abdaraman does not go to school, although there is a school beyond the Wadi, frequented by Europeans and some “Mozabite”, son of local merchants. He does not go to school because his father Aleck does not let him go. “Aleck - I ask him - why do not you send your children to school?” Aleck looks at me deeply and tells me: “Brother Carlo, I do not send my children to school, because they become bad, look at the boys who go to school: they do not pray, they do not obey and they just try to dress well.”

Abdaraman is completely naked: he looks like a beautiful dark grey statue, the result of endless crosses between the black African deported slaves here, and the white African of the northern tribes: Arabs, Berbers and Tuaregs.

Abdaraman is Muslim, he endured circumcision like all the sons of Ishmael and is of strict observance. His father Aleck is a good man, enriched with faith and children. When the month of Ramadan comes, he fasts from dawn to dusk, while continuing to work his camp along the banks of the Wadi of Tamanrasset. Aleck is truly religious and every year remembers Abraham's sacrifice by killing a ram and on that occasion he buys a light cotton dress for all his children. His trust in God is absolute; and, even if very poor, does not steal, but lives by his work, which consists of digging for months and months in the sands of the Wadi an underground water channel called "seghia" and during the other months cultivating his field which requires water at least three times a week.

Once the Foreign Legion arrived and camped along the “seghia” dug in the sand that carries water to Aleck’s grain. Naturally the water failed to flow and Aleck’s grain of began to wither. “Aleck - I tell him, - if this continues, your grain will wither.” Tell the captain that the “seghia” is yours, and that he puts his camp elsewhere”. Aleck answers me: “Allah is great and will provide for my children”; and let the wheat die, while the legionnaires wash their trucks and throw water over themselves as a joke.

Thus Abdaraman accompanies me to the hermitage tonight. The sun has set and the air has become cool, favourable for a stroll. We always have many things to talk about, because we really love each other. Every morning I find him in front of the cell waiting for me to finish my meditation. We often take the tea together; and he tells me that he really likes the bread I make. Abdaraman always has an appetite; but he never asks for anything: it is I who must guess if he is hungry or not. Tonight he is in a serious mood and can barely answer my questions. I understand that he has

something important to tell me and yet he does not pluck up courage. Yet I know that I will not have to wait long before finding out, because there are no secrets between him and I. "What the matter tonight, Abdaraman, why do not you talk?" Silence. "Have you not eaten the 'couscous'?" Silence. "Did your father beat you?" Silence. "Has the fennec escaped from the cage?" Silence. "But speak, Abdaraman, open your heart to your friend Brother Charles." Abdaraman burst into tears and his nude body became agitated and contracted. It is quite a sight to see him cry: he lets it all out; and the tears, after having irrigated his face, continue their march down his chest and on to his belly. Now I am the one who is silent. I must wait for the appeasement of the elements. I clasp his hands more strongly as a sign of affection. "So, Abdaraman, what makes you cry?" "Brother Carlo, I cry because you do not become a Muslim!" "Oh," I exclaimed, "and why should I be a Muslim?" Abdaraman, I am a Christian and I believe in Jesus. I pray to God who created heaven and earth just like you, and our prayers go to the same Heaven,

because of the gods there is only one, and my God is your God. It is He who created us, nourishes us, loves us, if you do your duty, do not steal, do not kill, do not tell lies, if you follow the voice of your conscience, you will go to Paradise, and it will be the same Paradise as mine, if I too will have done what God commands of me. Do not cry anymore.”

“No, no,” Abdaraman shouts to me, “if you do not make yourself a Muslim, you will go to hell like all Christians.” “Oh, this is nice, Abdaraman, who told you that I will go to hell if I do not become a Muslim?” “The Taleb (teacher of the Koranic school) told me that all Christians go to hell, and I do not want you to go to hell.”

We have come close to the hermitage and Abdaraman stops. He has never come closer. He has always stopped a dozen or so steps from the building, and he would not enter for all the gold in the world, as if there were a mysterious devilment forbidden to little Muslims.

The love he has for me, and it is a lot, has always struck against the wall that divides us and that tonight really takes on such a frightful name: “inferno”.

I say to him: “No, Abdaraman, God is good and he will save us both, he will save your father, and we will all go to Heaven, do not believe that for the simple fact that I am a Christian I will go to hell, as I do not think you will go there because you are Muslim. God is so good! Maybe you did not understand what the Taleb meant, maybe he said that bad Christians go to hell, do not worry, go home and recite your prayer I will recite mine, and before ending, tell this to God, as I will say: “Lord, let all men be saved.” “Go ...”. I sadly enter the hermitage, in this small mud building, built by the same Charles de Foucauld, who wanted to be called the Little Universal Brother and who died here slaughtered due to ignorance and fanaticism by the children of the same tribe as Aleck and Abdaraman.

But tonight it will find it difficult to pray!
What a turmoil of thoughts have been

aroused within me by my little friend! Poor little Abdaraman! You too are a victim of fanaticism, of the inopportune zeal of the so-called “men of God”, of the religious who would send half of mankind to hell, just because “they are not the same as them!”

How painful it all is! How cold this possibly have come about? That the thread of love that unites me to a brother is broken by the presumptive “zeal for God!” That religion, instead of being a reason for union, becomes a trench of death or at least unconfessed hatred. Better not to have this religion which divides. Better to fumble in darkness than to possess a similar light!

After an hour of forcing myself to gather my poor soul before the silence of the Eucharist, I realised that the tears streaked my white “grandeur”. Now it was me who was crying. And do you know why? Performing an examination of conscience to purify my soul and not that of Abdaraman from sectarianism, I remembered a scene that went back to my

childhood. I was eight years old, the same as Abdaraman. Then I lived in a village in the shadows of an ancient bell tower. The people were not very religious, but it was a closed and excessively traditional community. One day a man came to sell books, going from house to house. I did not understand much then, but it was the first time I had heard the word “Bible”.

A strange agitation occurred in the village. First in the women, then in everyone; some out of zeal, others out of human respect.

A woman’s hysterical screams could be heard in the air. From a window she shouted: “Barbet¹, barbet, we have no need of your religion, get out of here.” This agitation reached the boys. The man walked in the middle of the street, pale. He carried the books in a big, dark, heavy bag.

A woman threw him a book she had obtained just a little while ago. The man lowered to pick it up without turning

¹ Barbet, [barbét] in Piedmontese dialect derived from the term “beard” (uncle), characterising evangelical preachers.

around. A stone thrown by a boy hit him in the back. He accelerated his pace, followed by the boys at a distance. Each had a stone in his hand. I was amongst them. At the Eucharistic blessing that evening, it was a Marian month, the parish priest praised us, because we had defended the trenches of the parish. It seems nothing; but after forty years, and particularly tonight, that scene acquires an entirely new value and severity.

I never confessed to having thrown a stone toward the back of a defenceless man, out of religious zeal. This episode is inscribed in a world that accepted such things, without seeing all the malice. But half a century later things have changed. There is something new in the air. A breath of the Spirit which animates the whole universe. An old world dies and another is born. Other sensitivities, other needs, other forces. We are at the cusp of an age marked by a great desire for love and peace between nations and among humankind. Truth and charity are once again marching towards one another; and

respect for the human person has become the mantra, the song of all nations.

An ecumenical sense dissolves the most complicated knots; and the desire to know and to understand far outweighs the temptation to remain closed within the old citadel of our presumed truths. Mankind, perhaps, for the first time comes out of the field without defences and with aspirations of fruitful encounters. Friendships are becoming the “norm” of human relationships and religious wars have been relegated to the chronicles of history. Abdaraman, my little and beloved Abdaraman, do not fear; we will love each other again and meet; and ... not only in Paradise.



Nazareth

Charles de Foucauld was a noble viscount. Dignified blood ran in his veins being accustomed to the command. Enamoured with Christ with the force of a St. Francis, intent on discovering within the Gospel, his personality, character and life. It is rare to find a man more passionately committed to discovering the details of Jesus' life so as to imitate his deportment, gestures and innermost intentions.

Well: in this ardent search, made to find a substance of living and faithful imitation, Charles de Foucauld was above all dumbfounded by one fact: Jesus is a poor working man. No one can contradict this fact. The Son of God, who could freely choose - something that does not occur to anyone else - not only choosing a mother and a people, but a social situation, and wanted to be a wage earner.

It must be said that this word "labourer", "worker", "salaried", has a very different connotation in the ears of a nobleman than

it would have in my ears. For Charles de Foucauld, choosing the social situation of a worker meant an abasement, the annihilation of himself. And it is precisely this voluntary position of Jesus to lose himself in an anonymous village in the Middle East, annihilating himself within the daily monotony for thirty years of rugged and miserable work, to disappear from the society "that counts", to die in total anonymity, that most upsets the noble convert. Why was Jesus not a scribe? Why did not you want to be born into one of those families destined for leadership, responsibility, social and political influence? And here is his impassioned search for his Divine Masters intentions which guided Him in the choice of life, of His entire life.

And it will not be long the the exclamation comes out which ultimately remains, along the way, an ascetic guide of the life of the great explorer of Morocco and of Saharan mystic: "Jesus has in the same manner sought the last place where someone could hardly wrest it away from him". Nazareth was the last place: the place of the poor, of

the anonymous, of those who did not matter, of a mass of the workers, of the men bent to the demands of hard labor for a little bit of bread. But there's more. Jesus is the "Saint of God". Well, the "Saint of God" realising his holiness with a not so extraordinary life, but entirely imbued with ordinary things, work, family and social life, with obscure human activities, simple, possible by all mankind. The perfection of God is poured into a subject that men practically despise, which are anyhow never sought for their simplicity, for a "lack of interest", because it is so common to many people. Once the spiritual reality of Nazareth was discovered, Charles de Foucauld would seek to emulate it, as faithfully as possible.

He will try to have a convent as small as the house in Nazareth, he will try to loose himself, annihilated in the silence of an unknown village, imitating Jesus the manual labourer, and would want his Little Brothers to always look for the last place, where the poor are, where the climate is rougher, with the smallest salary, the

greatest fatigue. Nazareth will mean all this; but not only.

Imitating Nazareth is not a small notion. When I think that a door, an enclosure, a wall can partition a holy family like that of Jesus from that of a neighbour who, despite living the same tempo, the same fatigue, the same day, they are to the antipodes as sadness, hate, impurity, greed, and sometimes despair, I am convinced of the immense inner richness brought by the Gospel message. The same actions, performed under the light of God, radically transform the life of a man, of a family, of a society.

Joy or sadness, war or peace, love or hate, purity or adultery, charity or greed are tremendous realities that make their ridgelines on the crest of man's interiority. Living a life in common, our dealings with men, daily work, love for our own people can in a certain way generate saints; in an other determined way, can generate demons.

Jesus in Nazareth taught us to live as saints during all the hours of the day. Every hour of a day are valid and capable of containing divine inspiration, the will of the Father, the contemplation of prayer: holiness, in short. All hours of the day are holy; it is enough to live them as Jesus taught us to live them. And for this reason it is not even essential to enclose oneself in a convent or to establish strange and sometimes inhumane times. Its enough to accept the reality that comes from life. Work is one of these realities; motherhood, the education of children, the family with all its commitments is another of these realities. These realities have to be sanctified; we must not consider ourselves to be holy just because we have made vows. This strange mentality of considering our hours of reading or prayer as the sole subject of spiritual life, yet not taking into account the hours of work and social rapports, and therefore our most numerous hours, is cause for serious deformations, of real distortions, and, at best, of anaemic or rickety religious personalities. All of man has to be transformed by the Gospel message; there can be no action in him

which can be indifferent; everything contributes toward sanctification or toward damnation. Nazareth is the life of a man, of a family in all the breadth of human activity; the manner of living for thirty years, therefore for the longest time available for human realities destined to pass into the melting pot of faith, hope and charity. Few have so well summarised the sanctity of common things as Gandhi in his writings. Here is what that great Indian mystic said:

“If when we plunge our hand into a bowl of water, or stir up the fire with the bellows or tabulate interminable columns of figures on our book-keeping table, or, burnt by the sun, we are plunged in the mud of the rice field, or standing by the smelter’s furnace, we do not fulfil the same religious life as if in prayer in a monastery, the world will never be saved.”

But there is still one aspect of Nazareth that I would like to draw upon, especially

for those who think that it is impossible to bring the Gospel message without tools, without means, without money. Jesus was the bearer of the message; and it was still Him the supreme intelligence, able to devise the best way to make himself understood and to realise the divine plan. Well; so what did he do? He did not open hospitals, he did not found orphanages: he incarnated himself into a people and lived the message in his entirety first: “*coepit facere*”: began to do. This word preceding the example, this presenting the “type” before explaining it to the listeners, was the way Jesus proceeded, which we so easily seem to forget. In many cases the catechesis is reduced to “words” rather than a “fact”, to conferences rather than a concern for personal sanctity. And here perhaps is the reason for the poor results, and even more so to the sadness and annoyance of Christians.

There is no efficacy because there is no life: there is no life because there is no example; there is no example because empty words have replaced faith and charity.

“I want to shout the Gospel with life,” Charles de Foucauld repeated often; and he became convinced that the most effective method of apostolate was to live as a Christian. Especially today, where people, having become sly, no longer want to hear sermons: they want to see. Nazareth is, before action, a long preparatory time of prayer, sacrifice; a time of silence, of an intimate life with God; a time of long solitude, of purification, of a knowledge of mankind, of the exercise of concealment: of that which matters, in short, to call oneself christian. The apostle will come out of Nazareth.

But what apostle?

About this word “apostle” a product of one of the greatest inflations of our times. There is talk of a direct and a backwards apostolate; all have become apostles and ... even carrying a chair is qualified as an apostolic activity. Perhaps being in the habit of using big words to impress upon parochial or diocesan life a slightly faster pace, but having said this, things do not

change and words remain words. I have no intention of analysing the authentic meaning of the word “apostle” here, nor to cause problems about the real magnitude of the so-called “field of the apostolate.” God, will You look at me! But what I would like to say in this regard is that by meditating for a long time on Nazareth I have heard from the depths of this mystery a clarification between the life of the laity and the life of the priest, between the apostolate of the laity and the apostolate of priests. My generation has experienced a somewhat special period, sometimes chaotic, and many things have to be justified both because of the infantile incompetence and our preparation, and because of this exceptional period of history. After all, when a house is on fire even a woman can be a fireman and a layman can give orders to a Bishop. But normally it should not be this way. It is inharmonious to see a layman who is an assistant pastor just as it is inharmonious to see a priest preparing electoral lists.

And why is it inharmonious? Here one could really write a lot of books to reply to

this question and certainly they will be written because experience has taught us many things. As for me, taken by my naivety in the middle of this sand which makes my brain arid and with termites that devour my books in the cell, I'm content to think of Nazareth and to find in the manner of the life of Jesus, Mary and Joseph the fundamental inspiration of the so-called spirituality of the laity.

This - the spirituality of the laity - should not be a bad or beautiful copy of that of the priest, but something else, in itself authentic and genuine, true before both God and mankind. Another is the activity of a priest, another that of a politician; another is the activity of a parish priest, the other is the activity of a worker or of a father of a family. If it is true that by spirituality we mean our way of thinking, living, channeling, sanctifying the acts of our life, if we deduce that thinking, living, channeling, sanctifying the acts of a priest is profoundly different from that of thinking, living, channeling, sanctifying the acts of a worker, a spouse, a mayor. It is the substance that changes. On the

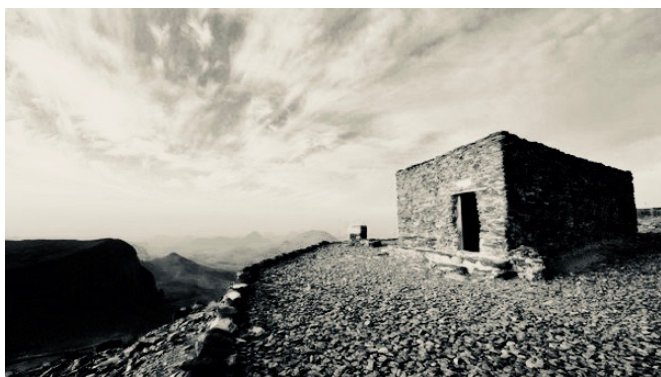
spirituality of the priest, much roadway has been made: just think of a Curé d'Ars or a Cafasso. Not so much can be said on spirituality of the laity, although many feel that ours is exactly the age that will tackle this problem. The layman should not be a "quasi-priest", but by virtue of his status he must sanctify his work, his marriage, his social relations so varied, complex and demanding. Saint Peter, says addressing the laity:

"like living stones, let yourselves be built into a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ." ([1 Peter 2:5](#))

Everyone here concurs that there is a real and authentic priesthood for the baptised, naturally very different from the priesthood conferred by the Sacrament of Orders, but a real priesthood that places the laity in the face of creation to interpret it, enliven it, liberate it, represent it. This is extremely important and the layman who does not hear this has betrayed his

vocation. The worker is a priest in front of his work; the father of a family is a priest before his wife and their children; the head of a community is a priest before his congregations; the peasant is a priest before his farm, his animals, his fields, his flowers. I think there has been too little development in recent centuries of the concept of a kingly priesthood of which St. Peter speaks in his letter to Christians and what it means to "offer spiritual victims pleasing to God on the part of the baptised", and this has at ground level created the aridity that we feel when dealing with the subject of the lay apostolate and - furthermore - of the position of the laity within the Church. What do you want speaking of the spirituality of the laity if you omit the fundamental prerogatives of a priest of created things, of the voice of nature, of the earthly consecrators of goods, of the saint of the earthly city? Not hearing of these things, the day when the layman wants to become "good" will end with copying the parish priest who is in front of him and who feels "spiritually ahead of him" and becomes a half-lay and half-priest

for the edification of the good parishioners, but certainly not of those who need it the most, “those that are distant”. These - and rightly so - can not bear the odour of this amalgamation and continue to think that Christianity can not resolve the problems of the world. There is still a long way to go, but we are at a good juncture, because priests and laity have become consciously aware of their position within the Church. This is what I wish for because I would have been prevented by those who enter today in the arsenal of apostolic action the starkness of my time in which priests were dragged to make electoral leaps and lay people to advise the Bishops on the governance of the Church.



The last place

I became a Little Brother of Jesus because God wanted it so. I have never doubted this call; also because, had it not been God's will to put me on this path, I would not have been able to resist for long.

Sleeping in the open, living in exhausting climates, frequenting very poor tribes and enduring the stench are of little import compared to the emptying of ones personality, to cut with the past, the radical acceptance of civilisations and countries other than our own.

And I'll explain myself.

As you know, the Little Brother can not have works of his own. He can not attend school, organise hospitals, create dispensaries, distribute aid. He must come here, choose a village, a bidonville, a nomadic tribe, settle within it and live there as all the others live, especially the poorest.

It is a total reversal of the European system in force until yesterday. Here the European who arrived: military, missionary, technical or official, built a house in the European style and lived as a European among the indigenous people. His standard of living was not that of the locality, but that of the country of origin. The task was to evangelise, elevate, help, organise, support; but always to European standard, with culture, methods, European objectives. The faith of these men had its testimony in the gift.

This is not a small thing! Miracles of love and heroism were written in the lands of Africa and Asia: churches, hospitals, dispensaries, schools, social works were created to bring relief, drive away death, accelerating the process of evolution for the underdeveloped nations.

It was the great hour of the missionary Church, it was the providential activity of colonisation, fully justified by the times and the realities of that time. In any case it was the insertion of the ancestry of the whites into that of the men of colour, It

was the first leg of the rich towards the poor, of the Christians towards the pagans. Things did not always go along smoothly, the missionary was not always synonymous with the man of God or an official synonymous with generosity and gratuitousness. The story would be too long; and, continuing, we would end up composing legal proceedings of the past. That which does interests us, is to notice that within a few years everything has changed.

The African churches are fully aware of their authenticity and no longer want to be copies of the French, Italian, or Dutch churches; people of colour not only will they no longer tolerate colonialism; but, as a reaction, have closed their hearts to the whites, they no longer have the confidence as they did in the past, often despising or hating everything that comes from the ancient race that tried to dominate them. As would be natural, in these cases, one passes their limitations, one becomes unjust; and in the past the only thing that we can see is evil.

It really is the time when we need to thoroughly review the situations, all situations. In this light, and even more so before any future activities of the Church in the mission field, the work of Charles de Foucauld should be seen as prophetic.

This man of God, ignorant of all problems, driven only by the force and light of the Spirit, goes to Africa at the height of its colonisation. In the air there is not the slightest hint of what will happen on a much large scale. Concerned only with bringing the Gospel to the Berbers or the Tuaregs, he understands what others do not understand and works as though the process of decolonisation had already taken place.

Not gifts, not hospitals, not dispensaries, not schools, not money. He presents himself alone, defenceless, poor. He understood that the might of the European, even if expressed in material things as hospitals and schools, says almost nothing at all on a religious level to the poor African; it is no longer a testimony as it once was.

He understood that the indigenous, even if very underdeveloped, is no longer willing to accept from above, as in the past, a message that seems too tied to a particular people and a given civilisation.

It necessitates our walking another road; and it is the same as always, because it is written in the Gospel, although with a new purity and strength: it is the path of smallness, of sacrifice, of poverty, of obscurity, of testimony. It is an indisputable fact, and not only for poor countries: one is afraid of power. A powerful, rich, dominating Church, frightens today.

The eye of man, terrified by the technical possibilities, is placed with joy upon that which is small, defenceless, weak. Even being afraid of an orator who cries out too loudly. Herein lies the secret of Charles de Foucauld's acquired popularity. He presented himself among assassins as the Tuareg were, helpless; He entered the Arab world dressed as an Arab, he lived among those who were the servants of the

Europeans as if they were his masters, he built his hermitages not by copying the Roman or Gothic architecture, but imitating the simplicity and poverty of the Saharan mosques.

This presenting oneself as poor, this dressing “like them”, this accepting their language, their customs, suddenly bringing down the wall which allowed for dialogue, authentic dialogue: that among equals. I will never forget a scene that in its simplicity expresses clearly the fullness of love for this new “go to those who do not yet know Christ”.

I traveled by camel between Geriville² and El Abiod³, and I was headed to a desert area, for a few days of solitude. At a certain point of the track I come across a work site. About fifty indigenous people, led by a non-commissioned officer of the military engineers, struggled to repair the road ruined by the winter rains. Under the

² El Bayadh (البيضاء) known *Géryville* during the French colonization of Algeria.

³ Oued El Abid (سد وادي العبيد)

Saharan sun, no machines, no technology: only the fatigue of men in the heat and dust wielding a shovel and a pickaxe throughout the day. I move up to the row of labourers scattered along the track, I respond to their greeting, I offer my “gherba” of 30 litres of water for their thirst. At a certain point, between the mouthfuls that come close to the neck of the “gherba” to drink, I see a smile unfold that I will never forget. Poor, ragged, sweaty and dirty: is Brother Paul, a Little Brother who chose that site to live his ordeal and mingled with the dough as an evangelical yeast. No one would ever have discovered this European under those clothes, that beard and the turban yellowed by the dust and sun. I knew Brother Paul well, because we had done our novitiate together. A Parisian engineer, he had worked for France’s Reggane nuclear test series⁴ one of the commissions destined to prepared the atomic bomb when he heard the Lord’s call. He left everything behind and became a Little Brother.

⁴ Reggane PG, French Algeria. 1960-1961

Now he was there; and nobody knew he was an engineer: he was just a poor man like all the others. I remembered his mother when she came on the occasion of his novitiate vows. "Brother Charles; Help me to understand my son's vocation, I have turned him into an engineer, you have turned him into a manual labourer. But why? at the very least you would use my son for what he is trained! No, he has to be a manual labourer. But say, would it not give the Church more propriety, would it not be more efficacious in making him work as an intellectual?"

"Madam, I replied, there are things that can not be understood with intelligence or common sense: only faith can enlighten us, because Jesus Himself wanted to be poor, because He wanted to hide His divinity and His power and live among us as the least of us. Why madam, the defeat of the cross, the scandal at Calvary, the ignominy of death for Him which was Life? No, Madam, the Church does not need an engineer more, but it does need grains of wheat more to be put to death in its furrows, and more this grain is ripened

with life and flavour of the sky and sun, and it will be all the more pleasing to the earth that it must welcome it for future harvests. How many things can not be understood on this earth! Is everything around us not a mystery? That Paul sacrifices himself, his culture, his possibility for love from God and for the love of his most abandoned brothers I understand him; but I also understand the reactions of his mother, and not only those of his mother. How many would say: shame! Such a beautiful intelligence, that it should end up in a furrow of the Saharan trail. He could have built a rotary press to disseminate the good word ... And they would be right too. It is difficult to grasp the right point in the mystery of a man who is a part of the great mystery of God. There are those who dream of a powerful Church, rich in means and possibilities, and there are those who want it poor and weak; there are those who give life and culture and study to enrich Christian philosophy, and there are those who renounce learning for the love of God and their neighbour. Mystery of faith!

Paul was not interested in “having influence” over men; it was enough for him “to pay”, “to disappear”. Others will seek other ways and will realise their holiness in a different way. Can I doubt the faith of my mother who would have desired all the riches of the Church in the hands for the decoration of the altars, the missionary works and the dignity of worship? And I, her son, who is the exact opposite as I dreamed of a worship that is more bare, a more heartfelt poverty, and above all an apostolate made with “poor means”, did I not also have my own reasons? It is so difficult to judge! So difficult that Jesus begged us not to persist on this debate. But there is a truth, to which we always adhere to, desperately always: love! It is love which justifies our actions, sometimes so conflicting. Love is the perfection of the law. If it is out of love that Brother Paul chose to die on a desert trail, this is justified. If it is out of love that Don Bosco and the Cottolengo⁵ built schools and hospitals, they are justified by this. If it is out of love that St. Thomas spent his life

⁵ *Priestly Society of St. Joseph Benedict Cottolengo*, ([Cottolengo Congregation](#)) Society of Apostolic Life.

on books, this is justified. There remains only the problem of establishing the hierarchy of these loves; and it is here that Jesus himself unequivocally teaches us:

“the greatest among you must become like the youngest, and the leader like one who serves.” ([Luke 22:26](#)).

And again:

“No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends.” ([John 15:13](#)).



oh you who passes by ...

The track to Taifet is just simply awful. Whenever I could, I would avoid it with joy. I much preferred to lengthen the journey by a few kilometres, passing through Ideles⁶ and Irafok rather than passing through those impenetrable gorges, where you had to make your way with a pickaxe and the shovel on the rocky stretches and then sink into the soft sand of the tortuous and outlandish Wadi which never ceased.

But that time I had no other choice and I was enlisted into it, collecting all the courage I had, which was not much after a fatiguing week of meteorological surveys day and night in the warm southern wind. The sky as usual was, cloudless, and the sun had been relentless since morning. But I paid no attention to it: my concern, my only concern was the jeep's engine which had begun to show signs of fatigue and no longer had an interest in uprooting the

⁶ Idlès (إدلس)

vehicle when it sank into the sand up to the chassis. Nevertheless one had to move forward. Who would have come to help me on that trail? The night before, at the well of Tazrouk⁷ I had loaded all the water possible, but also over ... and then?

And then, what would I have done in that deserted wasteland, an image of death and perpetual silence?

Yes, all my hopes were in the engine; that engine which I knew so well in the thrills and in the sounds that had never betrayed me until then. But now? Would I have been able to cross the twenty-two kilometres of Taifet on its fine soft and lustrous sands, so hot in its wild gorges? Nine o'clock ... ten o'clock ... eleven ... in-between pauses to let the engine cool down and got lucky on one of the more compact sandbanks I had finally arrived in sight of Taifet, a tiny village of former slaves on the edge of the Wadi's namesake.

⁷ Tazrouk (تاظروك or تازروك)

I threw myself on the track determined to win some traction on the sand with speed as the sand was becoming softer and subtle. The heat was suffocating and the water in the radiator was boiling. In these conditions I would certainly not have made much headway! In fact, in a last effort to sustain the pace, the motor whirring on full throttle, made a suppressed whine and stopped. I had sunk into the sand. I got out the jeep but I was afraid of sunstroke. I did not feel like taking the shovel to free the jeep from the sand. I looked for a little shade. In the Wadi, here and there where etel bushes. I went to the nearest and threw myself in its shadow. I do not know how, but at that moment I was reminded of the prophet Jonah sitting under the ivy that sheltered him from the sun whilst Nineveh was burning. But I had little time for biblical reflections because I immediately fell asleep.

When I regained my senses, I heard a low voices around me, interleaved with sniggering. I was bathed in sweat and my head hurt. I opened my eyes and saw Taifet's men standing around and smiling

at me. How white their teeth where and their dark skin gleamed! There were perhaps twenty and had interrupted their work when I arrived. Under the etel I saw that they had already prepared a fire for tea. That hot and exciting drink refreshed me somewhat. They invited me to eat the "couscous" with them and I offered everything I had on the jeep. Above all the tobacco made them talkative and the siesta had moments of particular gaiety. But it was so short!

It was the job that awaited them and what a job! They had to dig an underground channel into the Wadi, called a "fogara", able to collect the water that had soaked the sand like a sponge and take it to the nearby fields where planted wheat had a great thirst. The usual summer rainstorm had destroyed the old "fogara" and job had to be redone without wasting time. A week of delay would have sufficed in jeopardising the entire harvest, which meant hunger for the whole year.

I offered myself to work with them for a few days even though I knew that my help

was not of the most use. That's how I lived for a week with one of the poorest human groups that existed on earth. Work began at dawn and lasted until sunset. With rudimentary tools the tunnel was dug that ran for about three meters below the level of the Wadi in sandy but compact material. The excavated sand was pushed towards the wells that interlaced the tunnel and thrown out with the help of shovels. Those who worked in the gallery had the advantage of suffering less from the heat, albeit in an uncomfortable position, those who worked outside suffered less back pain, but stifled from the heat. In both cases, it was very bad and one longed for the evening, food and rest.

In the evening we ate around the fires, if American scholars of dietetics had been present they would have easily calculated the calories swallowed and always below the vital minimum. however, as compensation though, very rare things were eaten for European dishes and tastes.

On the first evening, a plate of roasted grasshoppers was served with a little

“couscous”; the next day, some sand mice called “gerboise” and on two other occasions cooked pieces of a lizard called “dobb” very tasty and which according to the Tuareg contained around forty precious medicaments. The night, wrapped in a blanket, near the huts, I looked at the sky for a long time before falling asleep.

What connection could there have been in all that glittering of stars with the misery, into which I had descended; between that infinity of space in the cosmos and the needs of those mortal men? This was the mystery of evil, of suffering; The mystery of the men who die of hunger, who live brutalised by inhumane work, condemned to a life in which the perpetual anguish of finding a piece of bread every day poisons the joy's of the sun. But I was too tired to think about why God did not intervene, He was so powerful and so good. I gave up too easily over the “gods of the earth”, the men who could so easily have helped.

What would it have cost to write a letter to my many friends in Italy? They would immediately send me a “bulldozer” to dig

the trench in just a few days; they could at least have urgently sent some large cement pipes to stabilise the tunnel making it safe and prevent cave-ins from the first flow of water in the Wadi. And I stood there, immobilised looking at the stars!

Was my inactivity justifiable or at least that lack of my intelligent activity? What use could my poor hand give when faced with so much work, my old heart facing so much exertion? Would it not be better to look for others to help out?

This is a predicament that I am often faced with, indeed so frequently that it has become a continuous temptation to the momentum of my vocation.

Deflecting just for an instant from the spirit of faith in which I try to live in order to immediately see “human common sense” triumph in me.. The common sense of Brother Paul’s mother who could not understand her son’s seemingly useless sacrifice on the Saharan routes, my own good sense trying to convince me that I will be more useful to Taifet’s people by

bringing truckloads of material here; the common sense of men who believe that with money everything can be resolved and that suffering is unnecessary waste. But is there any common sense in the Gospel? Or is it a mystery? Perhaps when Jesus came to this earth, He, the Omnipotent, He who is Love, could He not heal all the sick, feed all the poor, soothe all the wounds, raise all the dead? Why did He not do it? Why did He leave the world as He had found it, needy, suffering, unjust, bad?

It is true that He raised Lazarus, the daughter of Jairus and the son of the widow at Naim, but only to prove that he did not intend to resurrect all the others and there were a multitude. Yes, He had healed so many, only to let them fall ill again at the first opportunity, certainly not a rarity to men on earth.

No, things are not as clear as human common sense would have it, it remains, like it or not, a great and dark mystery that only faith can enlighten us and illuminating us with a light that is not of

this world and that has a need to be utilised with wide open and insightful eyes.

The mystery is Jesus Himself. And it is a mystery not only in its divine transcendence, but also at the moment when He approaches us with His Incarnation. The perfection of God, the omnipotence of God, the infinite love of God became man through Christ who “lived among us”. Always, and above all at the time of “living among us” they are real in their brilliant beauty: in Bethlehem and on Calvary. In Bethlehem God becomes absolute helplessness, on Calvary suffering itself. Never had Jesus been like man as in those two situations, because helplessness and suffering are the most discernible legacies of man on earth as creatures and as sinners.

But there is a substantial difference between the helplessness and suffering of man and the helplessness and suffering of Christ: the first are obligatory, the second are voluntary; the first in the revolt, the second in love. Jesus places himself next to

man and teaches him to live helplessly and to endure suffering with love, in love. Love is therefore the great open window on the mystery of one and the other the inheritance of man, is only love. Next to the man immersed in his poverty or suffocated by his pain, Jesus passes.

He had thousands of ways to help him, but He chose the hardest, the most radical: to imitate, put himself in his place, resemble him as much as possible. *“In all things he became similar to man without the sin.”* Instead, next to Job who looks at his ulcers and cries upon the midden of life, the theologian friends frame discussions and converse about the “why”. They even reach the point of judging Him and accuse him:

“If you suffer, it is because you have sinned,” they tell him, leaving the poor man in tears and bitter words in his mouth: *“Let the day perish in which I was born, and the night that said, ‘A man-child is conceived’.”* ([Job 3:3](#)).

It is because of this, that those who suffer, theology is not enough. We need to do something else.

When I departed for the first time for Africa to become a Little Brother of Jesus, I had lived for some time in Algiers, as a guest of an old friend. My heart was in turmoil those days, and the world appeared to me in a new light, that sprang in torrents from the intuition born in the heart of the one whom I now wanted to follow on the desert trails: Charles de Foucauld.

I saw everything transposed in comparison to a European's viewpoint, endowed by means and culture, desirous to give, to do something for others. I would have liked to hide without a wallet in my pocket and dressed as an Arab in the anonymous throng of poor Muslims who were swarming in alleyways of the Kasbah. I remember noticing that at midday a long line of beggars began to assemble on the sidewalks of a building as solid as a fortress ...

Every poor man had a mess-tin. I saw a door open and a white nun appear, her veil with two large white cornets, and near a huge steaming pot. It was time for the daily distribution of alms and every poor man left with a loaf of bread and hot soup. I stared at that procession as if it were hallucinatory, considering those men and women marked by misery, tears came to my eyes, veiling the scene under the bright sky of the African city. I was looking for my niche in the midst of all that poverty. Having abandoned my homeland driven by a desire to empty myself to give myself to God, to seek among the poor the crucified face of Jesus, to do something for my most abandoned and despised brothers, to find in them and in love for them, a more rapid vital union with the Eternal. What should I do then? Did I also have to open dispensaries and give, give bread, culture and medicines to those poor people? What was my place in the great evangelising work of the Church?

I sought the place of the one who had attracted me to Africa, Father de Foucauld. All small, all humble with mess-tin in

hand, I found him at the end of the row. He smiled discreetly as if he wanted to excuse himself for his also being there, there to cheat the land and complicate matters. Undoubtedly, at that moment, even with all my fear of suffering, with all my weakness to bear the burden of others, my terror of climbing on to the cross, I understood that my place was also there and that I would try to follow the desolate poor, integrating with them. Others in the Church would have had a duty to evangelise, build, feed, preach: the Lord asked me to be poor among the poor, worker among the workers.

Yes, above all a worker among the workers, since today's world was no longer a world in search of alms as in the time of Francis, but a world in search of work and justice. The world toward which I walked was a world in which poverty is expressed by the working-classes of all races and all peoples, for whom work is the hard daily sackcloth inasmuch a work that is not chosen is more painful, foul and poorly paid.

After a week spent in Taifet, I departed for Tamanrasset. I felt that I could not tolerate witnessing the exertion and poverty any longer. In this I was poorer than those poor people, because I could not bear what they had always endured. I needed prayer. I was thirsty to find myself alone in my hermitage where Jesus was exposed day and night to unburden myself with Him, to implore Him, to lose myself in Him. Above all I wanted to entreat him to make me smaller, more empty, more transparent. In addition to rendering me able to return to Taifet.

Yes, returning to Taifet to live the last years of my life. To have a hut “like them”, no belongings, a mat and a blanket “like them”, on the shores of that Wadi, to extract some water from it with those cruel fogara’s that continuously crumbled as if they were laughing at our toil! Yet “more than them” having Jesus in the Host, hidden in the hut so as to worship Him, begging him, loving him and draw from Him the strength not to rebel, not to curse, to accept lovingly the impoverishment of every hour.

And so, until the day when on the shore of the Wadi a little etel cross would rise, like a sentinel that would watch over the solitude of those men waiting, for others, others, others would come to love them and helping them to love.



The revolt of the good

The fact that for my vocational obligation I have chosen the poorest place means absolutely nothing at all: that which matters is making the effort and having the strength to remain in that place, every day of my life.

And this is terribly difficult!

Deep in the human heart is an abscess which grows with the passing of the years: it is the abscess of victimisation. No one is immune from this evil; and only much later does the soul succeed in detecting it and, God willing, in eradicating it!

Victimhood is the classical attitude of the man remaining in the Old Testament and who invokes in the relationships with his neighbour only sole justice.

Let us look at an ordinary family. Often the burden of fatigue is poorly distributed and particularly affects some of the members; most often on the mother.

For years and years the shoulders that carry that yoke bend to the effort; and, for that sacrifice, the rest of the small troupe manages to march in peace. But here you have a heart under those shoulders; and in that heart, a little at a time, the abscess of victimhood develops, growing in the prolonged, silent personal meditations. One day, a bad day, or because of a considerable effort or the effects a distinct experience, the abscess bursts and spreads its subtle poison throughout the body! Enough, enough now! I have been your servant so far, and you have not even noticed it. I sacrificed my life, whilst you enjoyed yourselves ... etc., etc.

When the same things occur - and they do occur - in a religious community or in an association of pious people, the tempest is far greater; often the walls of the building run the risk of falling asunder. It is a time of the scandal; and the spread poison is so strong that it has the power to paralyse love itself.

Yet we have to say that that mother is justified. On the trail of justice, we have to

admit that she has sacrificed herself for her loved ones. The others have been conceded many liberties; not her: she has laboured, amassed, defended, strengthened. And then there is something more serious, one that truly causes suffering: she has not been understood: we have overlooked her sacrifices without taking them into account, etc., etc.

At this point, each of us can tell his own story; and - oddly enough - each of us feels in exactly the same position as that mother, each of us feels they are a victim of someone or something. Who has had a childhood without affection, who has been badly recompensed by their office, who has been incorrectly evaluated for a promotion, who has not become a minister, who has been innocently incarcerated, who feels he has become manic because of a neighbours noise, who has not been properly understood by their Bishop, who has been forced to resign as president and who has been sent to the kitchen instead of being nominated superior of a convent.

But the unusual thing is that each of us is justified and all that I have said is correct. It is difficult that in the long life of a man, given the jungle in which he has been embedded, one does not receive an insult from someone, a wrong, a kick or perhaps a shot from a revolver. Therefore, under the weight of this tort or lying on the bed due to the harm that others have committed against us, we begin to savour the delights of victimhood.

It is an unbearable pain; all the more unbearable when it does not strike a part of ourselves, but our whole being down to our deepest roots, even our relationship with God, to our relationships with our neighbours. How can I love, truly love the brother who every day is the cause of my lassitude and rewards me with apathy and often with disregard? How can I feel at ease in a convent where my fellow men have not taken into account my true identity and have not understood my merits? How can I still work enthusiastically in a company that has promoted someone inept and relegated me to a seclusion of daily monotony? No, it is

not possible; and in fact I no longer love, I can not love anymore. Yet, no longer loving, not being able to love is not a trivial matter, something that leaves me indifferent. Loving, like it or not, is the end of my life, it is the reason of my existence, it is the only true joy to draw from without ever being satiated.

In fact, since I do not love anymore, my joy has left me, and the same peace is joyous. In the sleepless nights I feel the gnawing woodworm which destroys me, I feel the poison that rises in the twists of the spirit and paralyses me. I try to pray; but the same prayer has now become bitter, devoid of meaning.

One could say that the sky no longer answers me. My invoking cry for justice receives the abysmal echo of absolute silence. It seems that something has changed up there and that the same canons that once governed the ancient laws no longer moved the righteous God. Yes, that's right. The God of justice has forever turned the pages of justice. It was beautiful, it was true, but that page was

incomplete; above all, he did not have the explosiveness of God. To the man who ended up in the blind alleys of sin the canons of justice and truth were incapable of offering any salvation. Something else was needed; and it was the secret hidden in the centuries of God.

And Jesus came!

And his parents would not receive it. Not only that, but they pushed him out of his home, as a scapegoat, toward the desert. All of humanity was on top of him to strike, spit, hate. Jesus, the only innocent, the true innocent, bowed His head under the blows; He did not invoke justice and paid with His flesh and spirit for the sin of all. It was from that instant and forever establishing the laws of forgiveness, mercy, of love that goes beyond justice. After the incident on Calvary, peace would no longer pass through the razor of truth or in the tribunal of the law, but through the pierced heart of a God who had made himself into “sin” in Christ Jesus for us. The era of victimisation was over and with Jesus began the dynasty of the “victim”.

The real victim, a silent victim, a victim who compares himself to the lamb, a victim who accepts being a victim and who destroys the seeds of injustice in the fire of his love. "God loves the cheerful donor," St. Paul would say; and the victim is the cheerful donor. God will be the cheerful donor in His Christ; His gift will be irreversible; He forgives, and forever, all sins; He will restore lost virginity, restore life to the tired bones of the sinner, and transform a prostitute into Mary Magdalene and a pleasure-seeker into St. Francis. Life will triumph over death and spring will find strength and beauty from the same manure of the earth. "I have conquered the world" the Christ will cry out in his sacrifice; and joy will return to bloom in our anguished heart.

Yes, on the far side of justice for me as well. To overcome the gangrene of victimhood I have to go beyond the rugged mountain. Like Jesus, in imitation of Jesus, I have to laboriously climb the side of my pain and throw myself courageously into a descent towards the brothers, all the

brothers, and primarily towards all those which my myopic sick eyes see as the cause of my ills. There is no other solution. It is the *sine qua non* of true peace and intimacy with Jesus.

As long as I am wasting time to defend myself, I can not conclude anything and remain outside of true Christianity, that is, from the profound knowledge of the Heart of Jesus. I do not even have to list my reasons, because before me I will always find a brother who will list his; and the contention will continue into infinity. To forgive, to truly forgive means, in the end, to convince oneself that the evil they have done us was merited. Even more: it is good to suffer in silence. Even more: that beatitude is reserved for those who are persecuted because of justice, as Jesus taught; and that it is foolish to lose the preciousness of such moments just for a bit of vanity or human pride.

What would humanity say if, following Jesus on Calvary, they suddenly saw Him turn angry to a man who had kicked him and shouted at him, "Do you know who I

am?” No. Jesus did not turn around to defend himself against those who insulted him; he did not cry out his merits or his identity to the crowd that crucified him; above all, he did not hate them inwardly, thinking that he would condemn them to hell as soon as possible.

The novelty of Jesus’ love stands here; and He had taught it so well and Luke understood it so well.

“But I say to you that listen, Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you. If anyone strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also; and from anyone who takes away your coat do not withhold even your shirt.” ([Luke 6:27-29](#)).

The spirit of Jesus is unmistakable, it is so unique!

And Paul, who was undoubtedly the best interpreter of this spirit, deep within the heart of Christ, when he wanted to give the line from a Christian position, to God and

the world, will tell us in his letter to the Philippians:

“Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death — even death on a cross.” ([Philippians 2:5-8](#)).

Here is the summary of all the virtues and all the perfections. *“Have the feeling of Jesus within you.”* This *“feeling of Jesus,”* this *“humbled himself”* to obey the Father and to save man, will always remain the masterpiece of Christ’s love.

This is why truth and justice are not enough; that is why we are invited to go further.

The more we are ‘pushed toward lowering ourselves to imitate Jesus’ within us, the

more humility will reign within our hearts
and peace will inundate our lives.

Deep down, in these few lines, the sanctity
of man on the earth is at stake.



The God of the impossible

An accident in the middle of the desert paralysed my leg. When the doctor arrived, eight days later, it had been too late and perhaps leaving me lame for life.

Lying on a mat, in a cell in an old Saharan fort, I consider the stains of time on the whitewashed mud wall by the soldiers of the Foreign Legion. The 45 degrees of heat made it difficult to reason. I prefer to pray; but even praying is not easy at certain times. Remaining silent I try to transport myself, using my soul, beyond the confines of my wall, into the small Arabic style Kuba⁸ where I know the Eucharist is.

The brothers are far away working, those in the fields, others in the workshop. My leg hurts terribly yet I have to be brave, so as not to disperse thoughts into a void. I remember well a phrase which Pius XI said to us during an audience: "What does Jesus do in the Eucharist?" And from us

⁸ Chapel

students he awaited the answer. Even today, after so many years, I still do not know how to answer this. What does Jesus do in the Eucharist? Up to the present time how many times have I thought about it. And Jesus not just a leg, both immobilised within the Eucharist and even his hands. Having been reduced into a little piece of white bread. The world needs Him so much yet He does not speak. Men need Him so much yet He does not move! The Eucharist being truly the silence of God, the weakness of God. To be reduced to bread, to be reduced to silence while the rhythm of the world is so noisy, so convulsive, so powerful. One would say that the world and the Eucharist march in the opposite direction, along with moving away from each other almost into infinity. Courage is required so as not to be carried away by the direction of the world; it requires faith and the will to go against the current and go towards the Eucharist, to stop, to be silent, to worship. Furthermore very pure faith is necessary to believe in the powerlessness and defeat of the Eucharist which is today as it was yesterday, the powerlessness and defeat at

Calvary. Yet this powerless Jesus, nailed, annihilated is the God of the impossible, is the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end and, as John describes in Revelation:

“Faithful and True, and in righteousness he judges and makes war. His eyes are like a flame of fire, and on his head are many diadems; and he has a name inscribed that no one knows but himself. He is clothed in a robe dipped in blood, and his name is called The Word of God. And the armies of heaven, wearing fine linen, white and pure, were following him on white horses. From his mouth comes a sharp sword with which to strike down the nations, and he will rule them with a rod of iron; he will tread the wine press of the fury of the wrath of God the Almighty. On his robe and on his thigh he has a name inscribed, ‘King of kings and Lord of lords.’”([Revelations 19, 11-16](#)).

Jesus is the God of the impossible and the impossible is a characteristic of God. My powerlessness highlights His power, my littleness of creature and His Being the creator. Already in front of Job, thoughtful and in debate with Him because reduced powerless and wretched, God asked for an act of confidence by appealing, to obtain it, in the greatness of creation.

“Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth? Tell me, if you have understanding. Who determined its measurements — surely you know! Or who stretched the line upon it? On what were its bases sunk, or who laid its cornerstone when the morning stars sang together and all the heavenly beings shouted for joy?” ([Job 38:4-7](#)).

To me today more than this famous discourse on the power of the Creator and on the absolute powerlessness of the creature, giving advice to God, a saying by Jesus in the Gospel takes effect:

“It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God.” ([Matthew 19:24](#)).

This expression of Jesus comes back to my mind every time I see a camel on the trail and it makes me smile. Had He instead said “a horse, a bull ...,” no: a camel, and with a hump! Yes, it truly is impossible to make it pass through the eye of a needle.

Creating the firmament must certainly be a sign of great power, but passing a camel through the eye of a needle seems to me even greater: here the impossible is truly evident. In fact, to the astonished and perplexed apostles who exclaimed: “Then it is impossible to be saved,” Jesus calmly replied: “But what is impossible for man is possible for God.”

“Everything is possible for you”, Jesus will say to the Father in prayer at Gethsemane. Omnipotence is really the attribute of God.

On the contrary, there is one thing that is truly mine: smallness, weakness, misery, impotence. And I have so much of it that it is impossible that it will not count for something.

We need to think about it, we need to exploit this immense capital. Is it possible that the wave of mud, called sin, which has invaded the world almost from the origin of man and which in certain moments takes on such gigantic and frightening properties, is left over material from God's omnipotence? Is it possible that weakness in its general forms of fatigue, old age, sickness, incapacity, error, death is just something that can crush me without having any hidden power within? The world's debris no longer serves any purpose? Will evil remain a defeat of God Love?

When I think of my evening examinations of conscience I see them as a list of tasks not done or done incorrectly rather than the summary of positive things.

And even admitting, for a moment, that a certain equilibrium has reached my soul, a positive exclusion of a voluntary offence to God, nothing more gives me a sense of my infinite smallness and misery than the tremendous realisation of my inability to dilate my love .

That burning memory of the blanket denied to Kadà always returns, and the physical feeling of being almost unable to perform an act of perfect love. I experienced the same thing in prayer. Abandoned to myself with only my strength, I felt the reality that laboured in torment that, without God's help, we can not even once say "Abba, Father".

There are instances in which God leads us to the extreme limit of our powerlessness and it is then and only then that we fully understand our nothingness. For so many years, for too many years, I have fought against my powerlessness, against my weakness. But more often I hid it, preferring to appear in public with a nice mask of safety.

It is pride that does not want weakness, it is pride that does not accept being small; and God, little by little, made me understand that. I no longer beat myself, I try to accept myself, to consider my reality without veils, without dreams, without novels. It is a step forward; in fact I believe, had I done it straight away, when I learnt the catechism by heart I would have gained forty years.

Now, my impotence I placed in the face of God's omnipotence: the accumulation of my sins under the sun of his mercy, the abyss of my smallness vertically under the abyss of his greatness.

And it seems to me that the moment has come for an encounter with Him never until now known, one of being together as I had never felt before, an extending of his love as I had never felt before. Yes, it is precisely my misery that attracts His power, my sores calling him screaming, my nothingness that causes everything to topple on top of me, His everything.

And in this encounter between the wholeness of God and the nothingness of man is one of the greatest wonders of all creation. It is a most beautiful marriage because it is comprised of gratuitous Love that gives itself and grants a gratuitous Love that accepts. It is, after all, the whole truth of God and of man. The acceptance of this truth is due to humility and that is why without humility there can be no truth and without truth there can be no humility.

“Respexit humilitatem ancillae suae,” Maria said when she saw God’s substantial love fall upon her nothingness and felt that her flesh became the abode and nourishment of the Incarnate Word. How wonderful is the Nothingness of Mary to attract the Wholeness of God.

What sweetness in her prayer, her having total awareness of being at the extreme pole ends of God, where being little becomes not only an acceptance, but is a requirement of love. What a peace in the total abandonment of oneself to “Him” without significant rebound “egocentricity” returns, without “introverted” movements,

but is kidnapped in one radical, delectable contemplative gaze on the greatness and perfections of the Beloved. There is no more perfect relationship, and Mary inaugurates at a staggering height, unreachable by us, but exemplary for us, it is more absorbing than a religious soul under the dew of God.

It seems to me that I have found, after so many years, the solution to the problem, of all the problem here on earth.

I touched by hand my radical powerlessness and this was grace. I have contemplated in faith, hope and charity, the omnipotence of God, and this too was grace. God can do everything, I can do nothing. But if I place this nothing in with prayer, loving love of God, everything becomes possible in me. Returning to the memory of being crushed by a big boulder squashed by my selfishness, locked in my purgatory for having denied the spare blanket to Kadà.

It is a certainty: in me I feel an utter inability to perform the perfect act of love,

to follow Jesus on Calvary and to die with Him on the cross. We could spend several millennia and my situation would not change. But ... But what is impossible for me, because I am enriched in the Gospel, it is possible for God! And it will be He who gives me the grace to transform myself and make myself fit to do the impossible and to overthrow the boulder that separates me from the Kingdom.

It is therefore simply a matter of waiting, of humble and confident prayer, of patient exercise, of hope. But the God of the impossible will not fail to the appeal of my love.



The friendly night

When I came to the Sahara five years ago, I did not love the night. the European way of life was too attached to me, which is certainly not the best and above all it is the least suitable in keeping us calm and relaxed. For many night means, more fatigue to add to that of the day; for others dissipation, for others still insomnia, boredom and things like that: all under the great exhausting sign of artificial lights.

Here it is altogether another thing.

Above all, the night is for rest, true rest. When the sun sets, nature calms down, it stretches out as if under the deed of a sudden divine gesture. The wind that had accompanied us with its scream and its rage almost all day, ceases, the heat diminishes, the atmosphere becomes crisp and clear, and everywhere a great peace is extended, as if the elements and men had to restore themselves after a great battle with the day and the sun.

Yes, the nights here are something else; she has not lost her maidenhood, her mystery: she has remained as God made her, her own creature, bearer of good and life. After work, the caravan halting, you stretch out on the sand with a blanket under your head and you stay so to take at lengths tasteful breaths of the breeze which has replaced that enemy, the dry and fiery wind of the day.

Then you move away from the camp and go to the dunes for prayer. Time passes unhampered by haste or clock. No obligations pester you, no noise disturbs you, no trouble awaits you; time is all yours. You satisfy yourself this way with prayer and silence while the stars light up in the sky. Those who have not witnessed this can not believe what the stars mean to the desert! There is also a complete lack of artificial lighting and the immense vastness of the horizon increases their number and the splendour. Only the campfire on which the water for the tea is boiling, under which the bread is baked for dinner, is framed with a discrete light and flickering in all that glittering sky.

I only needed the first few nights spent here before I asked for books on astronomy and maps of the heavens; and for months and months I occupied my free time to render an account of what transpired above my head up there, in the abyssal depths of the cosmos.

Everything was an element of joy and material for my prayer of adoration. Kneeling on the sand, I fixed my eyes on those wonders for hours, marking the new discoveries in the notebook like a child. I understood, for example, that orientation in the desert is far easier at night than the day, that the points of reference are infinitely more numerous and more dependable.

In five years, four of which have been spent in the full desert, due to work, and thanks to the stars, I have never been lost. How many times in the search for a Tuareg encampment or a remote meteorological station, the light of day, the wind full of sand, too high a sun made me lose trail.

Now: I was awaiting nightfall, and my lost track was found with a precise orientation of the stars. The Saharan night, with its firmament, is not only a fantastic orientation dial, but also a resting place for the soul. After the day with all that light the soul is reduced to a house with windows without jealousy, unhinged by the wind or burnt by the sun. But the night!

Little by little the windows of the soul are settled again, shut away; better, half concealed by the darkness; and eyes wide open gazing across those fissures can, without effort and tension, quietly fixing things around me. No; I will never forget the nights under the stars of the Sahara. I feel at a point enveloped by a dark friend quilted with stars. Yes; a dark friend, an affectionate, restful, necessary, vital darkness. In them my interior life is not mortified, reduced; on the contrary, it can distend itself, realise itself, augment, rejoice. I feel like I am at home, safe, without fear, wrapped up in this loving faithfulness by the night friend, desirous in remaining like that for hours and hours, worried only by its brevity and eager to

detect in me and outside of me those characters and symbols of a divine language.

The friendly night is an image of faith, that is, of that gift of God defined by St. Paul

“Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.” ([Hebrews 11:1](#)).

I have never found a comparison more appropriate to my relationship with the Eternal: a lost point in infinite space, enveloped by the dark night under the discrete lights of the stars. This point dispersed in space is me; the necessary darkness, irreplaceable friend, the faith; the stars, a testimony of God.

When my faith was weak, not yet proven by effort or by religious experience, to me it seemed to appear incomprehensible, almost as scary as night to a child. But now that I have conquered it, that it is mine, I am happy to live in it, to navigate through it as on the sea; I no longer feel her to be an enemy, she no longer scares me; on the

contrary, she gives me joy, precisely because of her obscurity and divine transcendence. Sometimes I even love to close my eyes to see more darkness. So much so, I know that the stars are there, in their place, in the correct place to testify to me of the sky; and for a short time I can savour why darkness is necessary.

Necessary darkness, the necessity of obscurity in order not to be wounded by the excessive light of God.

By my nature as a man, there is no other possibility and I understand more and more that faith is not a mysterious or cruel subtle ingenuity of a God who hides without telling me why, but it is a necessary and irreplaceable veil because my discovery of Him occurs gradually respecting the stages of the development of the divine life within me.

“No one can see God without dying,” says Scripture in a sense that by seeing Him face to face is only a possibility for those who have passed through the arena of death.

For the earthly arena, which is the first, the light is such, such is the infinity of the mystery and such is the inadequacy of human nature, that they have to get through to Him a little at the time. Primarily through the symbols, then in the experience, then in the contemplation that I can anticipated on this earth if I remain faithful to the love of God. But it will only be a beginning, so as to acclimatise the eyes of the soul to endure so much light; but the process will continue without end; and the mystery will always remain standing above God's infinitude.

In the end, what is our life down here if not one of discovery, becoming aware, to comprehend, to contemplate, accepting, loving this mystery of God, the only reality that surrounds us and in which we are immersed like meteorites in an inestimable cosmos?

"In Ipso enim vivimus, et movemur, et sumus ..." ([Acts 17:28](#)).

There are not many mysteries; there is only one upon which everything depends and from which one can not escape, but it is so immense that it fills the all of space.

Human discoveries do not move a finger on the problem: the millennia that pass us by will have nothing more written from what Isaiah had already told us with his powerful expression of:

*“Vere tu es Deus
absconditus”* ([Isaiah 45:15](#))

and God himself declared to Moses in adoration before the burning bush:

“Ego sum qui sum” ([Exodus 3:14](#)).

Perhaps the sky was less obscure for Abraham and the men of the tent than it is for modern man; and faith was easier for medieval poets than for today's technicians; but the situation is the same and the relationship with God is identical.

Perhaps it happens to the whole of man as it happens to the single man, to whom, the more he advances in maturity, the more of a naked sentiment of faith and stripped poetry are required. But the way remains the same until the last man who will be born on this earth.

“And this is the victory that conquers the world, our faith” ([1 John 5:4](#)).

God asks of man an act of confidence in him; and this act is the true, the authentic submission of a creature of the Creator, an act of humility, of love.

This “trusting in God”, this “giving credit to the Almighty”, this satisfying our thirst for knowledge in the infinite sea of his fatherhood, this accepting his mysterious plan, this entering the school to listen to his Word, this “knowing how to wait” is the act of adoration worthy of man on this earth.

But if due to pride we do not want to put ourselves on the path of faith and turn our

backs on the divine reality and close our eyes before the testimony of the stars, what exactly do we resolve? Does our knowledge of the mystery increase perhaps? Will we find more light elsewhere instead of our night? Basically what do we know?

Without going to talk about God and the Incarnation of the Word and the Eucharist, what do we know about the physical world around us? Tell me what happens after our death? Of the pain of animals and the fate of things? Tell me what happens on Andromeda and what happens to the gazelle that dies?

What we know is little more than nothing; and what little we know is all unstable and relative, if we do not come to discover the root causes.

A sense of dismay should seize us after every discovery, which is there to tell us: "You are only arriving today?" How true and precious Jesus' recommendation remains: "If you do not make yourselves small ... you will not enter ..."

What I have tried to say about faith applies to everyone; no one can escape from this reality which is a gift from God, but which requires an effort from us in order to be realised.

God gives us the boat and the oars, but then he tells us: “it is for you to row”. Performing “positive acts of faith” is like practicing this faculty; and training develops the faculty like gymnastics develop the muscle. David developed his faith by accepting the fight with Goliath, Gideon exercised in faith not only by asking the Lord for a test of the fleece under the dew of the night, but also by going into battle with a few soldiers against a stronger enemy. Abraham became a giant of faith, accepting to the extreme limit the darkness of obedience that demanded the sacrifice his son. St. Paul will say in his letter to the Hebrews:

“by faith our ancestors received approval” ([Hebrews 11:2](#))

and continues

“Others were tortured, refusing to accept release, in order to obtain a better resurrection. Others suffered mocking and flogging, and even chains and imprisonment. They were stoned to death, they were sawn in two, they were killed by the sword; they went about in skins of sheep and goats, destitute, persecuted, tormented — of whom the world was not worthy. They wandered in deserts and mountains, and in caves and holes in the ground...” ([Hebrews 11:25-38](#)).

But above all the men and women who lived by faith, two creatures became gargantuan, reaching an almost superhuman maturity. They are placed on the watershed of the Old and New Testaments and called by God to such a unique and grandiose vocation that it makes the heavens linger in suspense awaiting their response: Mary and Joseph. Mary must become the Mother of the Word, giving flesh and bones to the Son of God; and Joseph must veil the mystery by standing beside her, making everyone

believe that Jesus is his son. For these two creatures the night of faith was not only dark; it was painful. One day Joseph, engaged to Mary, realises that she has to give birth to a son and knows that that son is not his. Are there any words capable of convincing a boyfriend that the mystery of that birth is due to nothing less than God's paternity? No reasoning could give peace and serenity to Joseph. Only faith; but it was so dark as to force the soul to extreme heights. And it will be precisely this naked and painful faith that supports this giant, placing him next to the Mother of God, to accompany her in her destiny, to participate fully in her mission. Oh, it will not be easy to go on the trail of a man destined to suffer and the husband of a woman who will be called the mother of sorrows.

The Child was born.

Some Angel came, yes, to dispel some of all that darkness; but the sky immediately closes above an even greater darkness; the children of an entire village are slaughtered because of their child; and

Joseph and Mary, fleeing, hear the weeping and howling of the women of Bethlehem. Why? Why is the Almighty silent? Why does he not kill Herod? No; we must live by faith. Escaping to Egypt, to become exiles and refugees, to let cruelty and injustice triumph. And so until the end. God had not facilitated a way for those who have been placed near His Son; He asked them for a faith so pure and so cutting that only two souls with a humility so unfathomable could support it. What an adventure to live for thirty years in a house where God lives in the flesh of an earthly man, to eat with him, to hear him speak, to see him sleep, to see sweat on his face and on his hands the calluses of his toil! And everything with simplicity, as something normal, of every day: so normal as to lose Him on a pilgrimage, as can happen to any other family; so normal that no one, no one will reveal the mystery, no one will realise that the son of the artisan was the son of God, the Word made flesh, the new Adam, the Heaven on earth. My God, what a greatness of faith! Mary and Joseph, it is you who are teachers of faith, the perfect examples to inspire our actions, correct our

course, support our weakness. As then, next to Jesus, you are still next to us accompanying us toward the Eternal, teaching us to be small and poor in our work, patients in exile, humble and hidden in life, courageous in trials, faithful in prayer, ardent in love. And when the hour of our death comes, that is, the dawn will rise on our friendly night, may our eyes, staring at heaven, see the same star that was in your heaven when Jesus came upon this earth.

